

GOD'S FOOL

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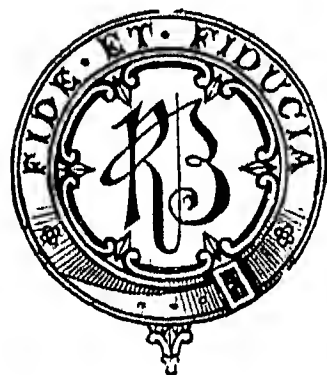
A Ikoopstad Story

BY

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'THE SIN OF JOOST AVELINGH'



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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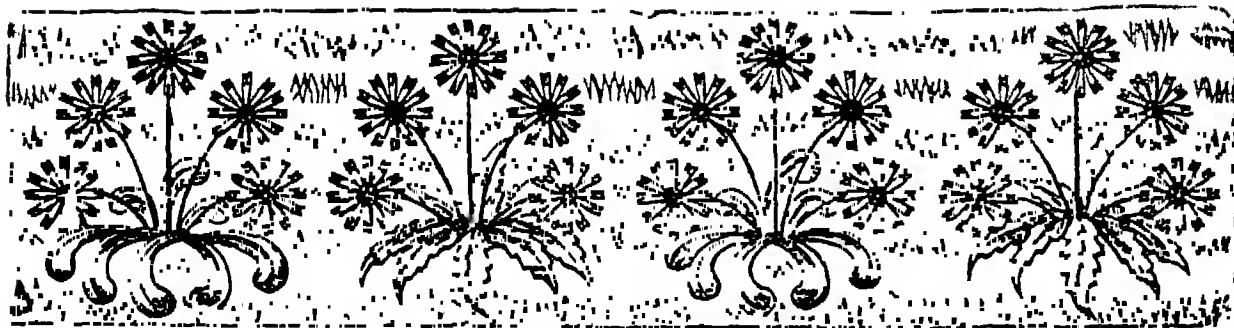
*THIS BOOK
IS DEDICATED TO
ALL MY FELLOW-KOOPSTADERS
IN THE
FOUR VAST QUARTERS
OF OUR
MEAN LITTLE GLOBE.*

There was a man once—a satirist. In the natural course of time his friends slew him, and he died. And the people came and stood about his corpse. 'He treated the whole round world as his football,' they said, indignantly, 'and he kicked it.' The dead man opened one eye. 'But always towards the Goal,' he said.

There was a man once—a naturalist. And one day he found a lobster upon the sands of time. Society is a lobster; it crawls backwards. 'How black it is!' said the naturalist. And he put it in a little pan over the hot fire of his wit. 'It will turn red,' he said. But it didn't. That was its shamelessness.

There was a man once—a logician. He picked up a little clay ball upon the path of life. 'It is a perfect little globe,' said his companions. But the logician saw that it was not mathematically round. And he took it in his hands and rubbed it between them, softly. 'Don't rub so hard,' said his companions. And at last he desisted, and looked down upon it. It was not a bit rounder, only pushed out of shape. And he looked at his hands. They were very dirty.

There was a man once—a poet. He went wandering through the streets of the city, and he met a disciple. 'Come out with me,' said the poet, 'for a walk in the sand-dunes.' And they went. But ere they had progressed many stages, said the disciple: 'There is nothing here but sand.' 'To what did I invite you?' asked the poet. 'To a walk in the sand-dunes.' 'Then do not complain,' said the poet. 'Yet even so your words are untrue. There is Heaven above. Do you not see it? The fault is not Heaven's. Nor the sand's.'

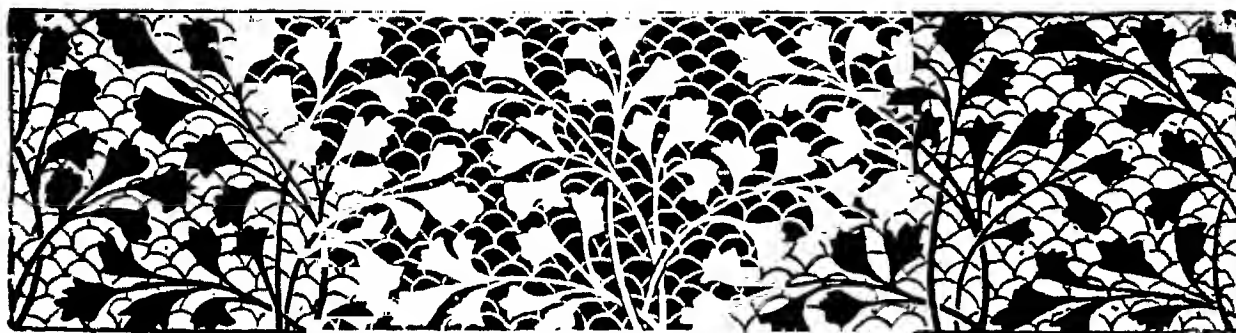


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GOD'S FOOL

CHAPTER I.

SWEEPS THE READER INTO A CLOUD OF MIST.

SUDDENLY the horses shook themselves, waking up, as it were, from their dull lethargy of damp. They tossed the great drops off their manes, in a quick splash of impatience, once, twice—then once again, with a succession of those nervous shivers that run all down a horse's sides and rattle the harness in a dozen places together. And then one of them neighed, pathetically; and the other hung down his head, as if neighing were

hardly worth while. Decidedly, Hendrik Lossell's horses did not like the mist.

'Fie!' said Chris from his box, drawling out the word. And then he said it over again, twice, very briskly. 'Fie! fie!' It was the second warning did it. They did not heed the first.

Chris never shook himself. He sat immovable in his long dark-blue winter-coat, his gloved hands holding the reins in his lap. An infinitesimal spray lay all over the surface of the thick frieze. He didn't mind the wet. It wasn't wet. For, in fact, the night was dry, or so a Dutchman would have called it. No rain had fallen. Only a soft white cloud was trailing swiftly over the morasses in a succession of innumerable puffs, as from the mouths of a thousand cannon underground, as if the spirits of the dead men in the waste were warring against the climate that had killed them. And a heavy mantle of gray misery was soaking quietly downward in

shivering masses from the leaden sky, as if the angels would shut out the consciousness of so much condensing rheumatism, and softly, imperceptibly, a bright glitter of moisture was breaking out on every leaf and blade and pebble, upon everybody and everything.

The house was a lonely one. It stood by itself, in its gardens, on the road outside the town; and the nearest group of cottages, some hundred yards distant, had long since sunk away in clouds of vapour. You could not see much more than twenty feet in front of you. And soon you would not be able to see as much as that, for darkness was rapidly closing in over such dull twilight as still feebly struggled with the damp. Already the 'seeing' was very blurred and indistinct. It was an April night, by-the-bye, late in the month.

A baker's boy came up the avenue and passed round to the back of the house.

Presently he appeared again, whistling a dismal tune.

‘Bad weather for driving,’ he remarked, as he went by.

‘So, so,’ said Chris cheerily. ‘One good thing, it keeps dry.’

‘Yes, it keeps dry,’ answered the baker’s boy. ‘That’s one good thing. Good-night.’

And he sank out of sight into the mist, his whistle alone lingering a few seconds longer.

Another quarter of an hour crept by. The darkness grew denser. And presently the clock of the big church-tower—away down in the town—boomed forth the hour of eight. Its echoes crept along the dreary silence, and lay faint upon the air. The chimes which must have prefaced those final strokes had got lost in the mazes of the mist.

Just before the striking of the hour the front-door had suddenly opened, and a man had come running out, and away into the fog.

‘Whoever can that be?’ thought Chris; but he never speculated long on the unknowable.

He looked up at the lighted window in one corner of the house, on the top story. There were only two stories.

‘Terribly fond of the poor creature,’ he soliloquized, half aloud, ‘one might think, by the way he keeps the horses out. And that with the infirmenza in all the stables of the neighbourhood. And it’s not he will stop at home for fear of anybody’s catching it.’

Chris remembered his own experiences last year, when he had been bad with this same influenza, and had been obliged to drive his master to the office through the rain, at least a week too soon.

He shook his head reproachfully; and as the drops fell from his hat, he thoughtfully shot them off his sleeve with finger and thumb.

‘A bad master,’ he murmured. ‘Seems to me the bad masters get all the good servants in these parts. Perhaps that keeps them bad.’

He gazed vaguely into the gathering darkness, as if searching for a solution of this mystery. And the clouds of white mist drizzled upwards, and the clouds of gray mist drizzled down.

One of the horses sighed—a long-drawn sigh. With the swelling of his sides the carriage creaked drearily forward, and then sank back again. The other whisked his tail.

Chris yawned. But even as he did so, he straightened himself and arranged the reins. A man’s shadow had passed rapidly across the white blind of the lighted window.

‘Up at last,’ said Chris to himself. After a pause he added cautiously, ‘At least.’

A few moments later, however, the house-door was thrown open with a bang which startled the horses. They bounded erect at

once in a tremble of expectation. 'Wo—a!' cried the coachman, tightening his grasp, and reaching for the whip from its holder. The little brougham quivered, as if recoiling for a spring.

A gentleman leaped, at one rush, from the dark hall into the dark carriage, throwing, as he passed, the single word 'Home!' in the direction of the box.

The carriage-door banged. 'Allez, boys!' cried Chris, for so much French do all Dutch coachmen understand, and all Dutch horses also. The little brougham jumped forward, and ran away into the fog.

It hurried along almost noiselessly in the clinging whiteness that seemed unwilling to let it pass, so tightly did the mist close round, deadening every sound with its dull weight. Presently, however, the door banged again. Chris glanced round quickly, impatiently. Only the close carriage behind him, and the

horses trotting briskly down the road in front.

'I do wish he would learn to shut the door when he gets in,' muttered Chris angrily; 'it's always falling open unexpectedly. We shall have an ugly accident some day in a crowded street,' and he whipped up the horses, already going fast enough.

Once within the town-gates, he found it necessary to slacken his speed. The gas-lamps, few and far between, lay like blurs of yellow fog amidst the white. Streets, in which there was barely room for two vehicles to pass each other, were cut by steam-tram-lines. Chris peered forward a little anxiously, keeping his steeds well in hand. After a minute or two he came to a narrow crossing, near a corner, and here he checked them into a walk. The streets seemed sufficiently deserted, one would think, only you can never be quite sure. 'See Misfortune before

she sees you,' says Chris's friend, the County Almanack.

A moment earlier Chris had heard his master in the carriage. That gentleman had coughed, and struck something, doubtless inadvertently, against the glass behind the box. Now, in turning the corner, the coachman was surprised, and heartily annoyed, by a second click of the lock, softer this time, as if the door were being gently drawn to. He greeted it with a round oath at Mynheer Lossell's clumsiness, and, without deigning to glance backwards again, he cautiously wriggled round an awkward bend, and then once more slackened the reins. After that he did not check his pace till he turned into a broad avenue, and drew up at his master's door. No one moved inside the carriage. The coachman cast a reproachful glance at the lighted entrance. You could see the gas-lamp flaring steadily in the vestibule behind the glass doors. No one moved in the hall.

Evidently the sound of the advancing wheels had not been heard in the house.

He put his whistle to his lips, but, even in the very act, he hesitated, and let it drop again. He had never required to whistle on behalf of Mynheer—only for Mevrouw. Mynheer was often out of the carriage before it had properly stopped, long before the manservant had run down the steps to meet him.

He peeped cautiously down over his shoulder. He could make out nothing in that manner. An uncomfortable, indefinite wonder caused him to slip from his box, speaking soothingly to his horses the while, and so cautiously approach the brougham window. One glance, and all hesitation was gone—the carriage was empty.

He bounded on to his seat again, and, with a cut of the whip at the astonished horses, he swept round the short drive, and away again into the mist.

Old Mulder, attracted at last by this rapid exit, stood open-mouthed in the wide hall-door, staring at the backward reflection of the carriage-lamps, flickering like lucifer matches in the darkness. And after a moment even that faint flicker died away.

‘He must have fallen out,’ said Chris to himself over and over again, as he raced down the road towards the corner where he had last heard the door sink into the slot. ‘He must have fallen sideways in a fit or something.’ See what comes of his careless ways!

He stopped abruptly at the cross-roads. No one there. Nothing to be seen. Nothing to be heard. He called—softly, then louder—‘Mynheer!’ Whiteness, stillness. The drip of water, the glitter here and there of smooth surfaces, and long lines of drops. And the audible rustle of a Dutch mist. Pat! Pat! Pat!

‘Mynheer!’

He bent forward, following the stretch of shining streets with scrutinizing eyes. The chimes began to ring down tremulously from the tower. Half-past eight !

He drove on cautiously, still tracing the road on both sides with careful question ; he drove out of the city, into the deathly loneliness of the shrouded fields, still repeating, with bated cry, his master's name.

Not far from the house in front of which he had waited, he met them, a whole crowd of them, confused, alarmed, excited in that frenzy of mingled horror and delight which a great catastrophe calls forth among lookers-on. They were all crying together, in crazy, distorted lamentation and amaze. Chris threw back his horses on their haunches. What was wrong ? For the love of heaven, what was wrong ?

A new outcry greeted him. They sprang back in alarm from the frightened, struggling horses looming in a cloud of steam. The

light poured across their eager faces distorted with fear. Over the champing of the horses' bits and the screaming of the women a man's voice rose.

'Lossell's Chris, as I'm alive! Would you believe it? Of all people, Lossell's Chris!'

'And why not Lossell's Chris?' cried that personage in a white fury, half rising from his box-seat with uplifted whip. 'What's the matter? Where's my master? What is wrong?'

'Wrong?' echoed a chorus of voices; and the shrieks redoubled. Somebody wailed: 'Oh, how shall we tell him!'—a woman. And then there was a lull of silence.

'Wrong?' continued the man's voice tranquilly. 'There's only this wrong, coachman. There's murder wrong, that's all.'

And as he spoke a cry came from the distant house, a cry as if of the voice of a trumpet, deep and strong and irresistible,

over the sleeping country and all the far white fields :

‘ Murder ! most awful murder ! O Christ, murdered yet living, dost Thou know of the deed ? ’

A man stood at the open window, his face uplifted towards the starless sky.





CHAPTER II.

SHOWS THAT THE STORY WILL BE A HIGHLY
RESPECTABLE ONE.

THE fool sat in his room, by the fireside, with his hands in his lap. His eyes were closed. They were always closed. God had closed them. Many years ago.

In his youth? Well, hardly in his youth, if we distinguish our ages by their succession, for the fool had always been a child.

But he remembered when he had been a happy child. He remembered it vaguely, objectively, as we remember a dream we have dreamed or a book we have read. Not with a poignant consciousness of loss, but with a

distant envy cheered by hope. To know of happiness is to believe it possible. Whatever has been, can be ; whatever can be, may be mine. And from moment to moment he lived in the present, which is his all, expecting it to change and grow pleasanter, more like that other impression which still lies next to it ; and, lo, the present is gone, and another present is there, and hope remains.

Many of our best friends he missed ; but our most cruel foe—memory—was also a stranger to him. Not that he could not remember, only he could not call up and live over again as past, with any degree of actuality, half-forgotten phases of joy or sorrow, the heart's experience, or the mind's. He recalled how he had burnt his hand badly more than a quarter of a century ago ; he recalled it as if it were yesterday, and a troubled look came over his face, and he shrank back in alarm. But he smiled when they told him that his mother was dead, and

he said that it was not true, and pointed in the direction of her young picture against the wall. He knew that it hung there; they had told him.

How had they told him? you will say. This man to whom God had refused both the light of His sun and the light of the human voice? What message from the outside world could pierce the darkness in which he lay, blind and deaf? Hush, hush! let me tell my story in my own way. Yes, you are right, he was blind and deaf.

He could not remember many things, he had not many things to remember; yet this morning, as he sat there in the loneliness of his room—the loneliness of his life—scattered fragments of the past came rolling across his mind like beads from a broken necklace. He caught them up here and there as they passed him, not heeding, unable to rearrange, the lost symmetry of the string.

There had been a time, long years ago—

more than thirty years ago, only to him it was not a memory, but a sensation—a time when it had seemed as if all the gifts of fortune had been showered down upon his head, a golden, curly head, gilded by the sunshine of half a dozen summers. All the children of the neighbourhood that were old enough to feel envy had envied little Elias Lossell. His father was the great merchant and town councillor, Hendrik Lossell, who, from being a nobody, had suddenly risen to the rank of 'somebody's husband' by his marriage with the only daughter and heiress of old Elias Volderdoes, the biggest rogue and most respected tea-jobber in Koopstad. For Koopstad, though only a little place, had nothing provincial about it, and vied with Amsterdam or any other great city in its simplification of all social distinctions according to the needs of the nineteenth century. The only casts it still recognised were connected with the Mint, and the one Order it now

invariably honoured was the money-order. It looked down with supreme contempt upon those out-of-the-way sister-cities which still ventured to maunder about their 'old families'; such ideas might have answered very well in their day, but they would not do for anyone in Koopstad (except the old families themselves) since the railway had brought it within forty minutes of the capital. You were always getting into awkward predicaments for want of a definite limit; now, with the new standard, as imported by the new train, no misconceptions were possible. You applied the decimal system, with due regard to proportion, and there you were. A man possessed of a hundred thousand florins was deserving of a certain amount of respect; a man possessed of two hundred thousand florins had a claim to exactly four times as much esteem, and so on. When you got beyond a million, the good citizens of Koopstad dropped their voices and folded

their hands, as their fathers had done in church. Old Elias Volderdoes had got beyond the million. He had done so on that last occasion when he had taken up the Government commission for the damaged cargo of the *Ino*. *It's an old story. They made him something after that—President of the Chamber of Commerce, I believe.

And they took off their hats to him a little lower. The worthiest of them—the 'well-intentioned burghers,' as the rich people called them—regulated the sweep of their hats through the air by the same mathematical rule which governed their hearts' esteem. You might have set up an algebraic equation—unconsciously, but automatically, exact—between the angle of the circle of their salute and the income of the person they saluted. The salute was old-fashioned, but the idea entirely modern, as new as most of the fortunes which graciously waved a benedictory response.

I am not speaking evil of Koopstad. Heaven forfend! I am merely anxious to prove that we are not out-of-the-way people—you can get to Amsterdam in less than forty minutes if you take the express—and that these Lossells for whose tragic story I ask your brief attention need not necessarily have lived in our quiet neighbourhood, but might have done honour to the big city which you inhabit, unless yours is the melancholy one where they only do homage to a tea-jobber, when he doesn't cheat, and remains poor.

Hendrik Lossell, then, from being recognised by hardly anybody but his creditors, suddenly dropped into the very obtusest angle of salutation through his marriage with Margaretha Volderdoes. He loved her—so he said; and it is very possible that he loved Margaretha Volderdoes rich; we need not inquire whether he would have loved her poor, for she wasn't. And she loved him;

she would have loved him under any circumstances, as long as he could lift to her pure forehead those great black eyes, behind which there was nothing but a machine for counting dollars, but which seemed to spread like very lakes of liquid tenderness.

So they loved each other, and it was all very beautiful and sentimental ; but old Elias did not properly appreciate sentiment, and it seems an extraordinary thing that he should have let them marry merely because they were in love. The old ladies of Koopstad still shake their heads over this mystery ; but they need not ask me about it, for I cannot tell them any fresh particulars, no more than the ' Christian Reformed ' minister's wife, who knows all the scandals of the town, including every original or unoriginal sin that has been committed there during the thirty-seven years of her residence in the place. I have a shrewd suspicion, if you ask me, that we all of us, however old or wealthy we may

be, retain a soft spot somewhere in our hearts that hardens last ; and, if such spot there be, you will probably find it is a mother or a daughter—perhaps, more rarely, a sister or—well, no, hardly a wife.

So they were married, and lived happily—all through the honeymoon, in which better-matched couples than they invariably quarrel. It is a bad sign, that, too smooth a honeymoon. And a few months later Margaretha had learned that you must not marry a man for his eyes. People tell you they are a mirror of the soul. And yet Hendrik Lossell's soul was far from—soft.

He was not a bad man ; he was worse—one of those men who are not bad enough to get better. He was not interested in much except himself, and he was not even interested in himself subjectively, as an independent 'I.' The object of all his attention was the firm of 'Volderdoes Zonen, tea-merchants,' incorporated, to the advantage of the

civilized world, in the person of Hendrik Lossell.

For old Elias had departed this life after having remained just long enough to thoroughly initiate so apt a pupil as his son-in-law into the mysteries of money-making wholesale. This fortunate dispensation—the remaining, of course, not the removal—Hendrik Lossell had accepted as a personal attention to himself, and it had put him into so good a temper with the government of the world in general that he had written down a double amount opposite the name of the firm on the Church charity list for the year—‘Volderdoes Zonen, six hundred florins.’ ‘A worthy successor!’ said the minister’s wife. But that was the Church minister’s wife; Volderdoes Zonen had nothing to do with Dissenters.

When the little Lossell was born they called him Elias. The name was ugly, but it was the fond grandpapa’s; and, besides, an ugly name looks well in business. It sounds

old-fashioned, and 'established 1791,' and all that kind of thing. 'Our Puritan forefathers,' you know, and the strict uprightness and straightforward dealing of those good old times. What a 'solid' impression it would make when young Elias was a middle-aged man himself, and sat behind the great office table, with old Elias's portrait above his head. He would point to it, over his shoulder, benignantly : 'My grandfather. I am named after him. His father was the founder of our house. If you leave the mixing to us, we can let you have it at two seventeen and three-quarters.' Lossell's heart glowed at the thought.

In the meantime the little Elias, having wept the customary tears over that preliminary sea-sickness which seems inseparable from all infancy, sailed over as smooth a life's ocean as falls to the lot of any human being, big or little. His grandfather, who lived to see the child's second birthday, worshipped the very ground he trod on. His mother,

having recovered in him his father's eyes, poured out upon his small existence all the love which had found no former outlet. His father let him alone. In one word, his happiness was complete.

And so, when he was five years old, his mother died. Within a year his father married again—married 'someone to look after Elias.' The someone was a merchant's daughter, a young thing, ready to hand, for her father had business connections with Volderdoes Zonen. She slapped Elias. That was her way of looking after him. It did not answer as well as his father's.

Presently there were two cradles in the old house, and twins in the cradles, and that put Elias's nose definitely out of joint. Matters did not improve when his two little half-brothers stepped out of their cradles and on to his toes. I wonder: Is that why they call them step-brothers, because they step into your place in the heart of that imitation

article which your father bade you call 'mamma' the other day, and which seemed so kind to you at first? Elias's stepmother's kindness had not even held out the regulation nine months' length.

Hendrik and Hubert, the twins, now began to enjoy life in their turn; their spell of 'good times' was to last longer, fortunately for them, than Elias's. The landscape might have reminded you of one of those Alpine scenes when it has already begun to rain on the mountain, while the valley is still bright with sunshine. Not that the inhabitants of the valley can help it. Nor that they feel any the happier because the mountaineers are in the dark.

The younger boys were fairly fond of their elder brother. They had no objection to him. He was not in their way. And they played with him, and bullied him, as children will. He, on his part, adored them with unreasoning worship. There was only

a difference of some half-dozen years between him and them. The second wife used to sit watching the trio at their play. Elias had retained that victoriously pleading look in the lustrous eyes over which his poor mother had so often sighed and prayed. He had a noble forehead—high and pure, as hers had been—and the golden curls fell clustering over it and down to his shoulders. He was tall and well-grown for his age, neither very clever nor remarkably stupid—backward if anything, and more eager to romp than to study. He was fully seven years old before his father put him to learn his letters—it being Hendrik Lossell's theory that the best leap follows on a recoil—and it took him as long to distinguish U from V as if he had been an ancient Roman.

The mother looked at her own boys. They were sturdy little Dutchmen, the kind of children no one but the mother looks at twice. She hated that other child.



CHAPTER III.

AND ALSO ALTOGETHER COMFORTABLE.

ELIAS was nine years old when the world, with all its good and evil, died away from him, and left him alone.

It was his little brother Hubert who, half in fun and half in wantonness, pushed down a flower-pot from the ledge of the tall nursery-balcony on the laughing face upturned to greet him.

‘Hubby! Hubby! look at the yellow bird on the big laburnum-tree!’

Crash!

Hubby was leaning over the parapet, kicking his white legs against its columns,

with gravely puckered face, uncertain whether to laugh or cry.

‘There is no hope,’ said the doctor ;
‘there is not the slightest hope. It is a good thing there is not.’

He said it harshly. Standing in the darkened room by the small iron bedstead on which the boy lay insensible, he looked from the stepmother, dissolved in self-pitying lamentations, to the father, hard and impatient, annoyed, perhaps, to be called away in business-hours. He did not think they cared much ; and he said it harshly, because he himself was sorry for the child.

‘Why a good thing?’ asked the father abruptly.

‘It is better sometimes, especially at his age, to die than to live on,’ replied the doctor.

Hendrik Lossell stood for a moment terror-struck. Then he burst out : ‘You

mean that he will recover! That probably his brain will be injured — that he will be mad, or an idiot, or whatever you call it! And he will live on for ever—these idiots always do! Hey! speak out: do you mean that?’

The doctor busied himself with his patient, disdaining to answer.

Suddenly Hendrik Lossell turned upon his sobbing wife:

‘Peace!’ he said fiercely. ‘Go out of the room. What are you howling for? For pity of the child, perchance! Go—go out of the room—do you hear me?—and pray for yourself, not for him.’

She obeyed him, gathering her wraps about her, and keeping her handkerchief to her eyes, as she slouched out of his sight.

He shut the door carefully behind her, and then he came back to the bedside.

‘Doctor,’ he said menacingly, ‘let us understand each other. You are right; that

child must either recover completely, or not recover at all.'

He spoke very quietly, but with such concentrated meaning that the physician, accustomed as he was to scenes of horror, trembled at the words.

'I shall do what I can,' he answered gruffly. 'The issues are not in my hand, Mynheer Lossell.'

For a few moments the merchant evidently hesitated, at war with himself. He walked up and down the little room in the dark, his straight, strong figure swaying to and fro. Then he said—slowly and distinctly—his hand on the door-handle—his face averted :

'I did not intend that you must, in any case, have power to cure the child. But, if he recovers, he must recover completely. If he does not regain the full use of his faculties, better that he should not return to life at all. Should either of these eventualities occur—I refuse to believe in the possibility of any

other—you will allow me to consider that mortgage annulled which I still hold on your house. Only, if you please, in the case of cure or no cure. Half a cure is worse than no cure. Half a cure, for me, would mean foreclosure. Good-day, doctor.'

The doctor answered never a word. He swore under his breath in the silence of the sick-room. 'Foreclosure it shall be,' he muttered to himself, 'as far as lies in my power, so help me, God! But whatever can the Right Worshipful mean?'

He called him Right Worshipful, you see, because his fellow-citizens had rightly considered that Hendrik Lossell's income was entitled to a place in the councils of the town.

Foreclosure it was, accompanied by envy, malice, and all uncharitableness; so much so that people began to ask each other whether the rich merchant was angry with Dr. Pillenaar for having saved his son's life.

Lossell did his reputation severe injury in Koopstad by the scandal he called up around this matter; but he did not mind such considerations a trifle in comparison to the satisfaction of having his own way. He knew that the burghers could not be guilty of contempt, for any lengthy period, of a man who drove his carriage and pair. So he persecuted Dr. Pillenaar, because Dr. Pillenaar had thwarted him, and left the rest to time and the popular sense of what is fit.

Still, people wronged him when they hinted that he was weary of his eldest son. He was quite willing that the boy should live, though, perhaps, he would not have grieved overmuch to see him die. But the semi-recovery of Elias was indeed a terrible blow to him, and it was not till after the merchant's death that Koopstad found out the exact reason why.

In the meantime the object of all this solicitude, after hovering for many days

between heaven and earth, turned the wrong corner and decided to live. Much to the doctor's astonishment, and no less to his fierce satisfaction, Elias's strong little body asserted its right to continued existence, whatever might become of the poor child's mind. He rose up, as it were, in his sleep, and walked about, and even spoke—unintelligible words at first, the indivisible rigmarole of a dreamer; then slow, short sentences, as the sounds fell gradually into their proper places again. But he could receive no answer to his questions. Some fatal injury had been done to the apparatus of hearing by the force of the blow. The doctors said that the tympanum was intact in both ears; they could not account for the absence of all power of perceiving sound. It would not have been of much use to Elias could they have explained the reason of his deafness. He would not have been less incurably deaf.

Some subtler influence was at work, out of

reach of the wise men's probing, eating away the very strength of the child's brain.

He was deaf. Well, so be it. It was a terrible affliction, but they must make the best of it, said his father. Many men were deaf who yet did their work—ay, and left their mark—in the world. Elias, as soon as he seemed sufficiently to have recovered from his illness, was set to learn the deaf-and-dumb alphabet.

‘An easy thing enough for him,’ remarked Lossell, ‘considering that he isn’t even dumb. He might have been dumb, you know, Judith. He can very well go into the business, all the same.’

Elias, however, did not find the deaf-and-dumb alphabet as easy as his father had expected. He struggled over it with almost hopeless failure, and there was something very pathetic in that constantly reiterated, ‘But I don’t understand,’ which he sent out into the silence around him like a futile

appeal for help. His great eyes lighted up for a moment with something of their old lustre under the impulse of that passionate questioning. But soon the strange dimness again sank over them. 'He did not really care to understand,' said his teacher with a shrug of the shoulders. 'He was the most unintelligent pupil that he—the master—had ever come across.'

'The child is too stupid,' Hendrik Lossell groaned to himself. 'It is not his deafness that is at fault, but his stupidity. If that fool of a Pillenaar had only understood both the boy's welfare and his own! What am I to do with him in this condition? There ought to be a law against wills like that of old Volderdoes.'

And then he made some *sotto voce* allusions to his deceased father-in-law, which were not at all in harmony with the veneration which he had vowed to the chief of the great house, whether alive or dead.

Elias understood that he was very naughty, and he ran away into the woods and flung himself on the ground and cried. He did not like crying, but sometimes he could not help it. And he lost himself in the wood, following after a bird of strange plumage which he had never seen before. He thought he knew all the birds that ever existed. He was quite sure that he knew at least thirty-seven kinds. He had counted them up on his fingers. And he was acquainted with any number of plants, and flowers, and funny wild things, only it tired his head to remember the names. It tired his head now far more than it used to, before Hubby threw the flower-pot at him. His head never used to be really tired before. And now, somehow, he was always having the headache, not always equally bad, but always that dull pain over the eyes. He could not tell them about his headaches. They would only say it was naughty of him. As he dared say it was.

He came home late from that escapade in the woods, and he read in his stepmother's angry looks the reproaches he could no longer hear.

Mind you, this is not a melancholy story, and I will not have it designated as such, however appearances may seem to be against me. It is essentially a comfortable story, intended to show the comfortable people that this is really a comfortable world, and that they have a right to be comfortable in it.





CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW LIFE BEGINS.

THERE was a big dinner-party at the Lossells'. Now, what more cheerful than a dinner-party? Especially for those who, snugly established by their own fireside, with a book and a valid excuse, remember that, but for such valid excuse, they too must have been there.

There was a dinner-party. The Lossells were old-fashioned people, and they sat down to table at half-past five. They made up for beginning so early by sitting on late. And the children came in to dessert, also in the

old-fashioned manner, somewhere near half-past seven.

Sixteen ladies and gentlemen, including the host and hostess, were gathered round the oblong dining-table, the ladies mostly in high dresses of some sombre silk, plum-coloured or bronze or spinach-green, with black-lace trimmings; the gentlemen in buttoned frock-coats and black ties — portly gentlemen, with sparse hair and solemn, stupid faces, and parchmented cheeks, from which the counting-house had drained away all pulsation, leaving only a yellow smoothness of unmeaning dignity. The long narrow board — there was nothing festive about it — stood covered with a number of dessert-dishes in painfully perceptible lines: plump, overladen dessert-dishes, full of hypertrophied fruit and sweetmeats, dishes that seemed to say, 'Look at me; I can afford to pay.' And the guests — especially the ladies — stared back with depressing indiffer-

ence. They also could afford to pay. Had that not been the case, they would not have been there.

There were no other flowers on the table than the big bouquet of red and pink roses, done up by the florist (done up tight), in a crystal centrepiece; but here and there stood a fat silver candlestick, with a thin candle, rising up like a plumed officer among the martial array of crackers and pears. And a couple of fat-bellied porcelain lamps, garlanded with a splendour of blooms such as Nature might vainly yearn to imitate, dropped their oil with a tranquil solemnity befitting the feast. The great gilt chandelier, with its dozens of candles, was not lighted. Only its covering of yellow gauze had been removed. To tell the truth, Mevrouw Lossell had made up her mind that she would light the candles if the Burgomaster's wife had accepted her invitation. But the Burgomaster's wife had written to say that she was indisposed.

‘Indisposed to come,’ said Lossell in his rough manner, as he threw the letter back to his wife. ‘She says she isn’t well enough, does she? Not well enough with us, she means.’ And so the candles remained unlighted.

None the less, there was light enough—what with the various lamps and candlesticks scattered about [nay, pompously planted] on mantelpiece and sideboard—to brighten even that big room, with its mahogany furniture and dark-red wall-paper. It was not the absence of outer illumination which left the assembly in the dark. You may put pounds upon pounds of wax-candles round a coffin, but you can’t make it a cheerful object by so doing. It was the dignity which did it, and the consciousness—what ho, a moralist!—that only poor people laugh.

Let us not speak irreverently of these worthy people and their pleasures. The occasion was, indeed, not such an one as

warrants a smile. They were working their way through a better dinner than falls to the share of most rich men. It is an irritating—nay, more, a deeply-saddening—problem for a wise dyspeptic to ponder: the superabundance in this little world of ours of things cookable, and the extreme rarity of cooks.

Mevrouw Lossell was telling all about the Burgomaster's wife to a chocolate manufacturess—a cousin—who sat four places off. Farther down the table Mevrouw Lossell's sense of propriety would not have allowed her voice to reach.

'Yes, the dear Burgomasteress is ill,' she was saying. 'She wrote me an affecting little note. I was so sorry, but I could not put off my party. The doctor has absolutely forbidden her to go out.'

'Except in an open carriage,' answered the chocolate-makeress tartly. 'I saw her driving in the Park yesterday with those fat-faced children of hers.'

This lady could afford to be plain-spoken, the Burgomaster's wife having honoured her last year's banquet with her presence, and she could enjoy a little quiet spitefulness, for—incomprehensibly enough, as it seemed to her judgment—the Koopstaders persisted in preferring adulterated tea to adulterated cocoa. 'They don't know what is good for them,' she would say, quoting from her husband's best advertisement. 'Tea weakens the nerves, but cocoa strengthens the blood.'

If this be true, let us hope that the Koopstaders will absorb Johnsonian quantities of the emollient beverage. Their nerves will be all the better for a little weakening.

'Yes, so she tells me,' Mevrouw Lossell remarked coolly, in answer to the information she had just received. It was not easy to discomfit Mevrouw Lossell. Her nerves were of the genuine Koopstad type. 'I must say I prefer healthy-looking children. Some people's children make you

wonder whatever their parents feed them on!

The cousin replied only by a nod and a smile, flung across to her hostess, over a gathering swell of interposing voices. She ignored the attack on her own chocolate-nurtured offspring. And she contented herself by remarking to her immediate neighbour: 'And some poor little creatures look so pinched and wasted you cannot help asking whether they get anything to eat at all.'

But the stout tobacco-planter next to her, even had he understood her meaning, would have felt no interest in the subject. True to the rule of his life, he had already eaten too much that evening. It was impossible for him to realize the condition of anyone who could eat too little. And it more than sufficed for him that Mevrouw Lossell had provided him—John Pruim—with so capital a dinner. They were beginning to hand the dessert. It

was seven o'clock. He loved Mevrouw Lossell.

The dessert brought in the children. They came through the great dark door behind the red damask screen, and round into the full light of the dinner-table, with its glitter of silver and crystal. They advanced—with children's solemn hesitation—towards the confusion of heaped-up fruit and disordered wineglasses, bordered by that circle of ponderous faces, all turned towards them in a sudden lull of languid interest. They saw nothing—absolutely nothing—but the dazzling white of the tablecloth, and their mother's meaningless face at the farther end.

The twins were in front, hand-in-hand, their squat figures clad in black velveteen blouses; and behind them came Elias, also in black velvet, but in a tailor-made suit, with a dainty white waistcoat, and black stockings instead of red. For Elias was now nearly eleven. His long fair curls poured down in

silken streams upon his shoulders. Mevrouw Lossell had wanted to cut them off long ago. It was so silly for a great boy to wear curls, she said. Elias had also wanted them cut off, for the same cause. But some reason or other made the merchant say 'No.' Perhaps in the depths of his money-loving soul there still occasionally stirred a soft recollection of the woman who had loved him more than money. It must have been so, for, one day, after a fresh altercation about the hairdresser, he suddenly said to Elias—on the fingers, for the child had now learnt to understand that language easily: 'Your mother had such curls as yours, Elias.' He did not say it till his wife had left the room. Elias never asked again to have the curls cut off.

The child was tall, too tall for his age, and his high forehead and delicately-veined cheeks were thin and pale enough to explain the chocolate-lady's apprehension. Yet it was not true that he did not get enough to eat—

not true, in fact, that he wanted for anything, except affection. He was still the rich town-councillor's eldest son. And he lived in the lap of that substantial luxury of which the Dutch have possessed the secret for centuries. The landscape around him was the same as it had always been, only the warmth had gone out of it when his mother died.

His was a swinging, easy step, as a rule, despite his deafness. Nature had accorded him that mysterious grace of movement, most intangible of beauties, which seems to mould immediately and imperceptibly the most various surroundings into a framework for one consistent central figure. He was not, perhaps, handsome according to the rules of straight lines and clear colours. But the child was interesting—interesting against your will. And when in the middle of his boisterous play he paused for a moment by your side, and turned full upon you those great eyes of his, already dimmed by the

presage of deepening trouble, a something in your heart awoke to say, 'God bless him!' before you turned away to talk of yesterday's dinner or to-morrow's dress. He could not hear you.' He would run away, shouting, 'Hubby! Henky!' with a voice that rang out like a clarion-note, and their shrill cries would come pealing back in futile answer—forgetful of his infirmity with the forgetfulness of children, and grown-up men.

I do not think that infirmity weighed very heavily upon him as yet. It was awkward, he felt, and hindered him in his intercourse with other children; but it did not prevent his playing as much as his heart could wish. And whenever he wanted anything, he could ask for it; and children, as a rule, are far more anxious to talk than to be talked to. Being talked to means being 'don'ted,' as a rule. Elias found that, notwithstanding his deafness, people could easily don't him far more than he liked. And his immediate

entourage had learnt to speak to him on the fingers. There had been some talk at first of trying to teach him to watch the movement of the lips, but this had been postponed, by the doctor's advice, till his head was stronger. The father had taken comfort. He had come across a couple of deaf and dumb gentlemen in Amsterdam who read everything that was said off the lips with perfect ease. They even spoke, and it was quite possible to understand them if only you took the trouble. They were in business, both of them.

‘Your son is not dumb, you tell me?’ said the director of the great deaf and dumb institute. ‘I will guarantee that, with the most mediocre intelligence, he will be able in the course of eighteen months to understand everything that is said to him by whosoever chooses to speak slowly and distinctly. There is no reason why he should not become as eminent a man of business as yourself.’

Lossell travelled back in a fever of delight. He kissed Elias on both cheeks when the boy came running out to welcome him.

The child's chief regret was that his little brothers could not converse with him. Mevrouw Lossell had positively forbidden their learning to do so before they knew the ordinary alphabet. She was afraid of some disastrous results. She could not herself have told you what. But Elias felt very sorry. He was not angry with Hubby.

And now, on the occasion of this dinner-party, he followed the six-year-old twins into the dining-room. He kept his hand on Hub's shoulder, as the little group steered, with uncertain movement, in the direction of the mistress of the house.

'What an interesting-looking child your stepson is, Mevrouw!' said Judith Lossell's neighbour, a white-haired old grandfather, as they sat watching the boys draw near.

‘I do not call him handsome,’ answered that lady shortly. She was thinking that the old man might as well tell her that Henky and Hubby were interesting-looking children too.

‘Well, not handsome, perhaps, but striking. Yes, striking. He has the kind of look peculiar to those children who make a noise in the world when they grow up.’

‘He makes quite noise enough already, I am sure,’ retorted Mevrouw Lossell in differently. ‘Come here, Henky; let me put your lace-collar straight. And say “How d’ye do?” Hubby, to Mynheer van Veth.’

The chocolate-cousin was making overtures to Henky, smiling and nodding over her shoulder, with an outstretched cracker in her hand. She wanted him to come to her, partly because she felt it was her duty to notice the children, and partly because it would give her an opportunity of telling her

side of the table that her little Diederik could read words of one syllable, while Henky Lossell did not even know A from B.

Elias stood awkwardly near his step-mother, still clinging, as if with a nervous clutch, to Hubby's velveteens. Old Mr. van Veth had offered him some sweetmeats. The boy did not take them. The old gentleman, looking up in surprise, saw that Elias's eyes were staring vaguely in front of him—away towards a dark corner of the brilliantly-lighted room.

'Good heavens!' he said to himself; 'if the boy is deaf, he should look at people. The eyes are the only means of intercourse left.'

'Come here, Elias,' called out the Town Councillor from his end of the table, as if his eldest son could hear him.

He beckoned to the boy. They often spoke to him in this manner, exaggerating their gestures that he might read their meaning thus unheard.

The stepmother turned round impatiently.

‘Why don’t you go to your father, child?’ she cried, pointing with her substantial arm. ‘Don’t you see him calling you? Don’t pluck at Hubby in that tiresome manner! Can’t you leave the poor child alone?’

Elias seemed to take no notice of anything. He stood staring, staring away to that dark corner—over there.

A sudden silence fell upon the guests. Mevrouw Lossell’s voice, rising over the buzz of conversation, had flattened it down at a blow. People looked in her direction—at her florid, angry features, and at the pale, unconscious face by her side.

‘How naughty!’ said her sister softly, yet audibly, from a distance.

The chocolate-manufacturess cast an indignant look in the direction of the voice. ‘Poor child!’ she interposed—out aloud. ‘Elias, boy,’ ejaculated the father in amazement, ‘come here.’

Judith Lossell heard the remarks of both ladies. They irritated her still more. She half turned in her chair, and seized her stepson's arm, and shook it angrily. 'You naughty child!' she cried. 'Why can't you attend to what your father says?' She trusted to her expression to explain her words—and pointed eagerly across the table.

The shake seemed to awaken Elias to consciousness. He removed his eyes from the cornice, and turned them full on the attentive guests assembled round the dinner-table. Evidently he felt that something was expected of him. He must say something.

'I can't see!' he said.

No one understood the meaning of the words for the first moment. There was a general movement of surprise, of uncertainty. His stepmother sat in annoyed bewilderment, not daring to make quite certain as yet that this was some miserable trick. His

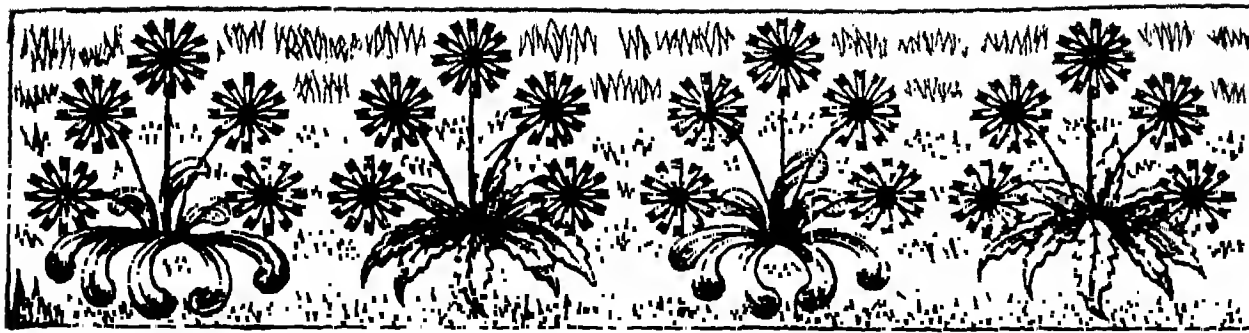
father bent forward as if about to speak. But the wall of his frightened reserve once broken through, Elias burst out, pouring forth all the flood of his childish terror and despair:

‘I can’t see! I can’t see one bit! Papa! mamma! where are you? Didn’t we come into the dining-room? I don’t know where I am! I don’t understand! Touch me, Hubby! It’s all dark, and my eyes are open! Oh, papa! what has happened? Oh, papa, papa, papa!’

He burst into tears—into passionate, panic-struck, audible sobs. There was something alarming in the thought that they could not reach the child—alone in his silence and his darkness. The guests started from their seats. Some of the ladies fell back, and, unable to bear the pain of that wild sobbing, broke into sympathetic cries and weeping. The wretched father ran round from his seat with a groan. He caught the child to his arms, and drew him away to an embrasure.

‘Hush! hush!’ he stammered, as he stroked the golden head. ‘It will be better presently—better presently. He can’t hear me!’ he suddenly cried, turning fiercely on the dumfounded faces grouped at some distance from the corner where he had taken refuge. He looked from one to the other. ‘Make him hear me!’ he gasped. ‘Tell him, somebody—make him understand that it will be all right soon! It is some passing distemper. Comfort him, somebody! Here, you, Judith! No, not you!’ He pushed her from him. ‘O my God! can no one stop his crying like that? It will be all right presently—all right presently.’

For a moment he had forgotten himself, and all his hopes and his ambitions. He lifted the child high in his arms, and bent over him, face to face, cheek to cheek, and so—motioning back all sympathy and all help—he bore him away into the silent loneliness of their individual loss.



CHAPTER V.

LIGHT AND SHADE.

ELIAS did not immediately become irretrievably blind.

After a few anxious hours his sight returned. He looked round and feebly recognised his father, and stroked his hand. And a little later he sat up in bed and smiled. Then the doctor took his hat, and went home; and when the doctor's wife, who had sat up for him, met him in the passage, and said, 'Well?' he answered her abruptly, 'Don't ask me,' and brushed past her into his study and banged the door. It was not Dr. Pillenaar. Elias had cried in vain

for Dr. Pillenaar. The man who had ruined Pillenaar dared not ask his aid.

The child grew better without it. For a time, at any rate, he could see. But now, under the stress of this new calamity, he confessed to those continual headaches he had not dared to complain of before. His frightened stepmother reproached him for his reticence.

‘Yes, I very often have a pain over my eyes,’ he admitted; ‘but, mother, I didn’t think I might.’

This is not a melancholy story. I refuse to be told that it is melancholy. It ‘ends well.’ You who can see, and won’t, and won’t hear, and can, you will envy my blind child yet, when the lights and shadows change.

In the meantime he was more interesting than ever, and the doctors talked him over at the Club.

‘There is some permanent injury to the

brain from the effects of the original blow,' said the physician last called in. 'The communication between it and the organs of sense suffers in consequence. First the hearing was intercepted. Now it is the eyesight.'

'I have always said the brain could not entirely recover,' interposed Dr. Pillenaar. He was heartily sorry for the patient, but he was a little glad that his prognostic should not have proved erroneous.

'It is like a volcanic territory,' began another man, who liked to hear himself speak. 'There has been a subsidence, or an eruption, and the telegraph-wires have come down. So long the boy is blind. As soon as the communication is re-established, or succeeds in re-establishing itself, he can see again. You will have another upheaval presently and another crash, and some day it will be with the eyes as with the ears, and no one will be able to put the telegraph-poles up again.'

‘Poor little chap!’ said the doctor who had witnessed the flash of the first telegram, after the interruption, between father and son.

‘But, for Heaven’s sake,’ cried Pillenaar excitedly, ‘you, who have influence with the father, get him to see some great specialist. Get him to take the child to Utrecht, or abroad, if he wants to go farther and fare worse.’

The other doctor mentioned this idea to Lossell next time they met. The idea was a good one. And the frightened lad went with his stepmother to Utrecht, and had to undergo the ordeal of the railway journey, and the long wait in that sickening ante-room—all doctors’ ante-rooms are sickening, if you are really ill—and the solemn trial with its suspenseful watching of the great man’s kindly face. And then, because he was a child, they mercifully sent him away before the final verdict, as if it lightened the victim’s doom to leave the sword suspended over his

head. Alas! the sword was indeed suspended there, and no medical science could unhook it. The famous oculist could only speak of possibility and hope. The eyes were sound—strong, healthy, and beautiful still. The danger lay in the brain. ‘And of diseases of the brain, my dear madam—shall I be absolutely, straightforwardly truthful?—neither I nor the brain-doctors know anything at all as yet.’

As long as the attack had not repeated itself, however, there was every hope of its not proving of serious importance. In this all the wise men were agreed. A single seizure might signify nothing; a recurrence would mean ruin. It must be avoided at all cost. A residence of several months in a milder climate was suggested. Could Mynheer Lossell see his way to arranging that it should take place?

‘I will sacrifice anything I possess to save the child’s eyes,’ said Hendrik Lossell. ‘It

is a matter of life and death to me—of life and death !

‘Anything he possessed!’ People smiled to each other a little sceptically when those words were repeated at the Club. Yet they did wrong. They did not know, to begin with, how much Hendrik Lossell possessed. They could but take off their hats to his carriage in the street, and not to the contents of his strong-box.

So Elias was sent away to Clarens, and instructed to play about in the open air, and to drink as much milk as he could swallow. He did not like the milk, but he liked driving the cows, so they allowed him to combine the two, and he was happy. It was his old nurse, Johanna, who made this arrangement for him, and many others. Mevrouw Lossell could not leave the cares of her household, so Johanna was sent for—Johanna, who had watched over Elias’s golden morning, who had loved his mother with unreasoning affec-

tion, and who had only left the family because she could not endure the sight of another woman in the dead mistress's place.

She had reproached herself a thousand times for having deserted the orphan, and she accepted Mynheer Lossell's proposal as a message of reconciliation with heaven. What mattered it that she was called to face all the terrors of a foreign country, a land of mountains and cataracts and other traps for the unwary, a land where it would be impossible for her to obtain that bi-hourly cup of coffee which is the fetish of Dutch domestic servants? She bravely answered all the forebodings of her terrified circle of acquaintance with the words, 'I shall be caring for Elias,' and she went forth undauntedly into the jaws of the Unknown, like a female Stanley, with her charge and Mynheer Lossell in a first-class carriage—change at Cologne. Her old mother and three sisters watched the fast train speed away—into the distance

—into an infinitesimal black vagueness—into emptiness. There was nothing left of her. Nothing but a memory and a prayer.

She had her coffee at Cologne, but she had no coffee between Cologne and Bâle. She survived the omission. The spell was broken, and I believe she is a contented woman still.

Rooms had been found for her and the child in the house of a widow, whose husband had been Swiss watchmaker in a Dutch country town. The landlady, therefore, spoke a few words of Dutch, and understood a good many more. Had this not been the case, she could hardly have accepted the charge of her lodgers, for Elias was prevented by his infirmity from picking up words of a foreign tongue, as other children would have done ; and as for Johanna, to her the whole French language appeared to present no definite sounds of which a rational, full-toned organ of speech could possibly lay hold.

‘The people,’ she said, ‘are all butterflies, and the French words are just like moths; they go flying, flying past you, and when you succeed in grabbing hold of one of them, it crumbles away to nothing in your hand.’

Johanna very seldom caught her moths.

They spent two months together at Clarens, two months of a superbly fading autumn, watching the crimson glow pale off into an ashen gray. Around them the late roses in neat beds of cultivated colour; before them the blue serenity of far-stretching water, the limpid lake; and opposite, ascending above the sloping masses of russet and golden and faintest yellow—those sylvan splendours of Nature’s gorgeous death—o’ertopping all that changes with our changeful seasons, towering high into the presence of the unalterable: the pure summits of eternal snow. The child, whose eyes had never before lifted themselves to any earthly object sublimer than a church weather-cock, now

gazed with awe-struck wonder upon these heights that yearn towards the stars. He realized, untold, not so much their loftiness or their purity as their unbroken silence, the snow-bound unapproachableness in which they rest throughout the ages. It must be very still up yonder, he felt, always still, as in the stillness of his own young heart, on which no ripple ever broke of other laughter than his own. And the mountains drew nigh to him in his loneliness through one of those inexplicable childish whims of sympathy which sometimes bind our early years in a communion with Nature which we never quite lose in after-life. He would fancy himself a mountain—the mite—tall, majestic, untouched by the world's coming and going, far away in the hush of God, nearer to heaven in the solitude and the silent waiting. And he would nod to the great gray pile beneath the dropping clouds.

‘We are friends, you and I,’ he said aloud.

Johanna poised her uplifted needle in her hand, and stopped to look at him. He was gazing into the lofty distance, into limitless transparent azure, away beyond the mountains, beyond the clouds. Johanna shook her head.

The next moment he was romping through the little garden, the music of his own merriment filling his desolate heart; for Tonnerre had pounced upon him—Tonnerre, the landlady's nondescript spaniel, who owed his tremendous name to the unreasonable rumble by which he invariably showed his discontent. Tonnerre's discontent was chronic. His health was perfect, though Madame Juberton tried to make everyone, herself included, believe that bodily affliction accounted for his ill-temper. It was a pious fraud, common to the womankind connected with grumblers. As a rule, the people who never cease complaining complain without occasion, for you cannot possibly always

hit on a just cause of complaint. So they get into the habit of discontinuing their search for a reason, and they soon find out that they can get on far more fluently without.

Illogically, then—for he was intensely illogical, a human failing rarely found in dogs—Tonnerre had taken a great liking to Elias, which he showed him chiefly by pouncing upon him unawares. He had early perceived that the deaf boy could not hear, but only see him, and he utilized the discovery by inventing a game which would suit these unusual circumstances. Elias played with his four-footed companion as often as the latter would permit. Sometimes a little oftener.

The child was happy at Clarens. Everybody was kind to him. Johanna loved him. Madame Juberton, after he had been in her house for nine minutes, loved him too. She was not, you will notice, a very soft-hearted woman. Most women love an afflicted child,

when they meet with it, at first sight, and do not take nine minutes to make up their minds about the matter. God bless their motherly hearts!

‘Do you know,’ said Elias one day, after he had been sitting a long time pensive at his nurse’s feet, ‘you are—I don’t quite know how—but I think, Johanna, I think you are like mamma. I mean,’ he added, after a moment, in a solemn whisper—‘I mean mamma in heaven.’

Johanna vigorously shook her head in protest, but his eyes were not turned towards her.

‘I can’t say how I mean like,’ he went on thoughtfully, ‘not like her portrait in the library, but like her to me, somehow. Like the smell of roses, you know. They look so different till you smell them, and then they are the same. And it isn’t the smell, Johanna. I don’t know what it is. It’s the feel, I think. Since I am deaf, I seem to feel different. And when it—it tingles, then

it reminds me. And the tingles go together. I can't make you understand. But I understand for myself. It's the tingle does it, not the smell.'

She understood—indistinctly, yet enough. And she caught up the little fellow in her arms.

Two days afterwards she found him crying in his bed—a great boy of eleven. Fie upon him! What was he crying for? He did not dare to tell her. At last it came out, among the sobs. 'It was so wicked of him, and he was ashamed of it. But the thought had come upon him that Tonnerre was like mamma.'

And so love—the divine word beyond human utterance—stammered forth its first broken accents upon the silence of the deaf boy's heart.

A glow of kindness spread around and

over him, bringing with it undefined reminiscences of the opening scenes of his existence. People not only made those necessary signs to him, which they had always made since he had lost his hearing, but they added superfluous ones—little unexpected nods, and smiles, and twitches of the eyes, which came to him now as so many gentle words and terms of endearment come to more fortunate children. Johanna would sit watching to catch his eye; and his glad, frank flash of recognition would amply repay her for any tenderness she bestowed upon him. Madame Juberton's increasing affection took the form of increasing sweetmeats. The more her heart warmed towards Elias, the bigger she made her tarts. And it was not till she reached the limit of her largest pudding-mould that she found out how inconvenient is the limitlessness of the human soul.

He liked the tarts; no fear of his not

liking them. For he was a bright boy with a healthy appetite, and nothing about him of those transcendental little wretches who are too good to succumb to a weakness for goodies. I am sorry to own I fear he was not at all particularly good. His stepmother was right in saying that there was no danger of his dying from premature development of wings. He did not want his wings to develop. He did not want to die. He was self-willed, and he always gave the preference to his own view of his own requirements, as older children are apt to do at times. And he had occasional fits of mischief, as when he put Tonnerre into the milk-pail, because someone had explained to him the other day that thunder had turned the milk. He soon began trying to bully Johanna, and sometimes he succeeded, and sometimes he didn't. He did not mope about his deafness, for, thank God! he did not fully realize it. And, with the insouciance of his age, he had

forgotten all about the scare of his blindness. He did not think he was going to be blind. They had said it would be all right now the weakness kept away.

He sat, with Tonnerre asleep on his knees, and Johanna at work, as usual, by his side, watching the hushed sunset of a beautiful autumn evening. Johanna was knitting a set of reins for him—crimson wool with tinkling bells; she had been busy over them for some time, and he watched her work with increasing interest.

‘When you are ready, I shall be your horse,’ he said; ‘I am sure now I prefer being horse. I have made up my mind, because it is so nice to be able to run wherever one likes.’

Johanna nodded back to him, and beamed all over her genial face. Then she said to him on her fingers—for she had learned to use these signs with extreme facility—that they would go for their long-planned ex-

cursion to the mountains on the other side as soon as the reins were ready—to-morrow, perhaps, or the day after, and he should lead her all the time. He flushed up with pleasure, as he watched her nimble movements. 'That will be splendid!' he answered—'splendid!' He loved sweetmeats, undoubtedly, but he loved sweet words far better, and those fond glances best of all.

The pale autumnal light was rapidly shadowing over, so rapidly that it seemed as if you could almost watch the folds of the mantle of night come falling one by one across the landscape. A moment ago the whole mountain-side had been one great mass of sunlit foliage, swept together in tumbled waves of crimson, and sheets of vari-coloured gold. The confusion of splendour was already gone; a wide smoothness of dull orange was deepening into indefinite gray. And the cold, still sky was shrouding itself in mist. The sun had sunk from sight

behind the mountains, yonder, where his radiance still lay white. Elias sat looking intently on the spot where he had disappeared.

The nurse shuddered. The autumn air was cold, and earthy, wet with decay and approaching death.

‘Let us go in,’ she said.

But Elias clung to her, and held her fast.

‘Oh, it is beautiful!’ he said—‘beautiful! What a beautiful thing to see!’

She drew him into the house, and helped him to get into bed; and she sat watching him for many minutes after he had dropped fast asleep.

And the next morning, when Elias again opened his eyes, he found that God had left him nothing in the world for them to open on.



CHAPTER VI.

'THUNDER'-STORMS.

No, it was not unexpected, or unusual, or unlikely. At least, not if we are to believe the doctors, for the news no sooner got about that little Elias Lossell was once more stricken with blindness, than all the medical authorities of Koopstad exclaimed that they had foreseen this catastrophe from the first. And the great specialist who had advised the journey to Clarens remarked what a good thing it was that they had followed his advice, or the blindness might have come on almost seven weeks sooner. Old Lossell hurried

over to see what could be done for his unfortunate son. Nothing could be done.

It was not unexpected. At least, not to Johanna, who had watched, with that fatal perspicacity which only love bestows, for every sign of approaching danger. She could not deny to herself that of late Elias had been constantly troubled by his old enemy, the headache over the eyebrows; that he had complained of the restless flames and circles which would not let him sleep at night; that he had——

Ah me! that morning, a few days ago, when she had spelt out to him from her window, 'Jasje, see the big balloon over the water!' and he had called back out of the garden, 'There isn't any balloon, Johanna—there isn't any balloon at all!' How had she, in the phraseology of her own people, 'held her heart fast,' lest it should drop from her!

These and many other instances I have

passed over, not wishing to dwell upon what will be considered by many a sad episode in the story of Elias; anxious, above all, to avoid any semblance of a wish to 'pile up the agony,' as it is vulgarly called; but I am conscious of few things with greater clearness than of the fact that Johanna, when she detailed her experiences to me in after-years, repeatedly assured me that she had seen the prophetic cloud lie heavy on Elias's brow for many weeks before it fell.

It fell. The woman sat by his bedside, the unfinished harness on her lap. From out his sudden darkness the child poured out question after question, appeal after appeal. He wanted help—medical help; would they give it to him? Was the doctor coming? Had he been already, perhaps? What had he said? Would the blindness pass off as it had passed off last time? Of course it would pass off—would it not? would it not?

No answer possible.

The woman got up hurriedly, and rushed from the room. She could no longer bear that ceaseless cry into the void. And, then, she could not bear to be away from it, beyond the reach of his requirements and his sorrows, and she came hurrying back again, and fell down by the bedside, and took his little hand and held it fast in both her own.

And she was almost glad that he could not see her tears.

Already, in that first anxiety of desolation, she taught him that the pressure of her hand meant 'Yes.'

After a moment or two he understood her. A look of passionate relief came over his face. The inexpressible horror of complete isolation died away from him—a horror of thirty minutes' duration, never to be forgotten—communication was re-established, imperfect, yet possible. He trembled over it, cried over it, clung to it, and in a sudden flash of inspiration he burst out :

‘Stroke my hand, if you mean “No,” Johanna. It won’t remain, will it? It will go off, as it did last time. It can’t remain. Oh, Johanna, why doesn’t the doctor come?’

‘Let him stay where he is for the present,’ said Mevrouw Lossell, arranging her teacups, and looking away from her husband; ‘it will be much better both for him and for the other children. You say that the woman is devoted to him, and she can give him her continual care. He is content to be with her, I presume?’

‘More than content,’ said Hendrik Lossell bitterly.

She rattled her cups slightly, still without looking at him.

‘I have always deeply regretted,’ she went on, ‘that your son has not met my advances with such confidence on his part as I believe them to have merited.’

'The child!' burst out Lossell; 'the poor, wretched, motherless child!'

'Not necessarily motherless,' she answered coldly. 'You need not insult me without reason, Hendrik. These recriminations are as unseemly as they are unavailing. But, in the interest of my own children, I must discharge a present duty, though I can afford to ignore the past. However painful the duty may be, I dare not shrink from it.'

It is a thoroughly feminine trait to accuse an opponent of having started an argument which can no longer be profitably kept up.

'And what is your duty?' asked the merchant, with a palpable sneer.

'To suffer misrepresentation,' she answered quickly. 'Very well, I will endure it. And therefore I venture to say, Elias must not associate daily with his little brothers. The strain would be greater than children of their

age could endure. And I cannot allow them to submit to it.'

'Pooh!' said the merchant.

Judith was not a woman of half-measures.

'Brute!' she cried, turning on her husband. 'Choose between my children and your own.'

The phrase, inspired by jealousy, was an unfortunate one. She felt this, even as she uttered it.

'Mevrouw,' said Lossell stiffly, 'you forget yourself. Or rather, Judith, you are a fool. Mind this, it is neither your interest, nor that of your children, to estrange Elias. Some day, perhaps, you will be glad enough, both you *and* your children, to live in his house, and to eat of his bread. Good-night'—and he walked out of the room with the happy consciousness of having gained the victory at least once in his life.

Some things are praised for their sweetness, and some for their rarity. A husband's

triumphs belong to the latter, not to the former, class.

He was resolved not to leave the boy alone in a foreign country. He fetched him back without another word of excuse or explanation. But he did not immediately bring him home. 'Elias shall decide for himself,' he said. 'He shall do what he likes best.' But how to make him understand? There lay the difficulty; for the poor little patient had sunk into a state of apathy. He was rapidly losing his touch, such as it was, of the outer world. Walled in on every side, he began to succumb to the hopelessness of trying to look out. His eager questioning—at first a very torrent of anxious entreaty—was dwindling into one ceaselessly - repeated, unanswerable, 'When will the doctor make me see again?' Those about him grew to yearn for the stream of appeals they had formerly dreaded as they

watched him sitting silent, mournful, hour after hour, with only the reiterated interruption of that slowly-decreasing hope. And then even that restless flicker sank low, and for long periods he would not speak at all.

A few days after the catastrophe, Johanna suddenly snatched up her unfinished harness, and began vehemently knitting at it. She had been struck by the thought that though Elias could no longer lead the way as horse, he might still act the part of coachman. In this manner she would perhaps succeed in rousing him to a little exercise ; for as yet he shrank back from all contact with the outer world, and would creep brooding into a corner when they came to fetch him for a walk. He tore off the cap he felt placed on his head, and cried out that he would wear no more caps till the doctor made him see again. Johanna came to him, having finished the work in a hurry, and put the ends of the

reins in his hands. She had removed the bells which she had first added at his express desire. He had been very particular about those bells. 'For though I don't hear them, I can see they are where they ought to be,' he had repeatedly said. Now she cut them off with a weary sigh. 'He will prefer to know they are no longer there,' she said to herself. But she was mistaken. She was often mistaken at first; and it took even her yearning affection some time to find out the idiosyncrasies of a peculiar case like Elias's. Hendrik Lossell noticed this. He noticed many things in those days of indecision, anxious, waiting, longing to do the best for the afflicted child who persisted in living on, to his own detriment and that of them all. 'It wants a lot of love,' said the loveless father to himself, with a pang of self-reproach. He thought of his smooth, self-satisfied wife, and of chubby, happy Henkie and Hubbie. How could he bring yonder wreck among

them? And yet how dare he thrust from the door of his house its rightful lord?

Yes; let there be no secrets. Secrets are only clumsy aids to interest, and this story shall carefully avoid them. It does not require them, for it is a true story. Hendrik Lossell might be a great merchant, but wretched little Elias was the only rich member of the family.

When Johanna brought him the harness, he immediately felt for the bells, and an expression of pain came over his face. He realized why she had removed them; and a little querulously he bade her put them back. And so this rough peasant woman also learnt, step by step, her lesson of devotion—the devotion of her life. She was barely thirty when she returned to her post as Elias's nurse. She never deserted him afterwards.

The lad allowed her to persuade him, by caresses, to creep out into the open air with her. But the reins were a failure; for he

stumbled forward in his darkness and his uncertainty, and fell and cut his face. And again Johanna had to make a discovery—that the blind must learn to walk anew.

Tonnerre, also, had to learn the lesson that his friend could run no more. To him it was an enigma, and he puzzled over it with many growls. At last he gave it up, and adapted himself to circumstances, which had been altered without his consent. He rolled away within easy reach on the floor; and, actually, Elias felt after him. And then he rolled on a little bit farther, and again a little bit; and Elias rolled in the same direction, and grabbed at his tail as he whisked it up and down. And then Elias actually laughed.

It was for the first time in several days, ever since his seizure. Johanna threw her apron to her face, and once more fled from the room. It was such a bright little laugh.

She need not have fled from those sightless eyes. Undoubtedly. But one of the last things for her to realize was the fact that, if Elias was unable to see anything, he could not see her.

Parting from Madame Juberton meant parting from Madame Juberton's dog. And here a serious difficulty arose. Neither his father nor Johanna dared inflict new pain upon the sufferer. Yet neither, seeing the affection the lonely old widow lavished upon her only companion, dared at first suggest a separation between them. Already Elias had asked once or twice what was to become of Tonnerre. But it was impossible as yet to make him understand other signs than 'Yes' and 'No.' He knew it, and would soon abandon all hope of an answer, only repeating his question from time to time lest they should forget it. And once he had suggested timidly that perhaps papa might buy

the dog. He had always been a child of great delicacy of feeling, and he evidently shrank from the thought of Madame Juberton's loss, while unable to bear the prospect of his own. 'No,' he said, after a moment, as if arguing out the matter with himself. 'Papa cannot buy Tonnerre from Madame Juberton.' And he sighed.

Papa, however, resolved to think differently about the matter. He went to the landlady, and offered her twenty-five francs for her favourite. The old lady sat up in her chair.

'No, monsieur,' she said; 'I cannot sell Tonnerre. I love your unfortunate little son, but Tonnerre is the only friend I have in the world.'

Two pink spots spread out under her ears. But Hendrik Lossell was not in the habit of noticing such signs as these. They had no connection with business.

'I will give you fifty,' he said, and then—

as she continued to stare at him in silence—
‘well, madam, I will make it a hundred, and that is the very last price I can offer. It is six times his value; but I am grateful for your kindness to Elias, and the child is attached to the little animal. You cannot in reason, madam, do otherwise than admit that I am paying an utterly disproportionate sum for him.’

‘The price of the dog, Monsieur the Town Councillor,’ said Madame Jußerton in a great flutter, ‘is three hundred thousand francs.’

She made him a very low curtsey, and disappeared from his sight.

Yet the merchant was not to blame—not from his point of view. His offer had been as noble a conquest of self as a Dutch man of business could achieve. To deliberately offer for anything on earth—ay, or in heaven—what he believed to be twice its value—four times its value—six times its value—he would rather have had any number of his

teeth extracted, like that Israelite of the good old Plantagenet times. He trod his most sacred convictions under foot for the child's sake—never mind whether the sum be little or large—and having slaughtered his commercial self-respect on the altar of paternal affection, he was left standing gazing blankly at the faded pattern of an empty chair, while the growls of the insulted quadruped oozed towards him under the bedroom door.

Madame Juberton was peeping through the keyhole, and waiting for him to go.

There was no more talk after that of buying Tonnerre. Elias sent for him constantly now, as if he would make up for the approaching separation, and he sat silent in a corner for hours with the rough-haired bundle in his lap. It was only during their brief frolics on the floor that he seemed to wake to any consciousness of enjoyment, and even then he would very soon desist

with a 'Papa, when is the doctor coming again? Does he think I am better, papa?'

Madame Juberton would stand watching the playmates. She said nothing. Only once, when Hendrik Lossell caught her in the act, she broke out sharply :

'I do not approve myself, monsieur, of letting children play too much with dogs.'

'I do not think,' the merchant had retorted, 'that this child plays too much.'

Madame repeated those words several times to herself in the course of the day. As often as she did so, she carefully took off her spectacles, and wiped them, and put them on again. And she gave Tonnerre a lump of sugar. That lump of sugar came upon him as an unpredicted eclipse might come upon an astronomer. It reduced all his calculations to immediate chaos. For he only got lumps of sugar on Sundays, and he never had been out in his reckoning yet. Perhaps he thought that the Comtist calendar had been

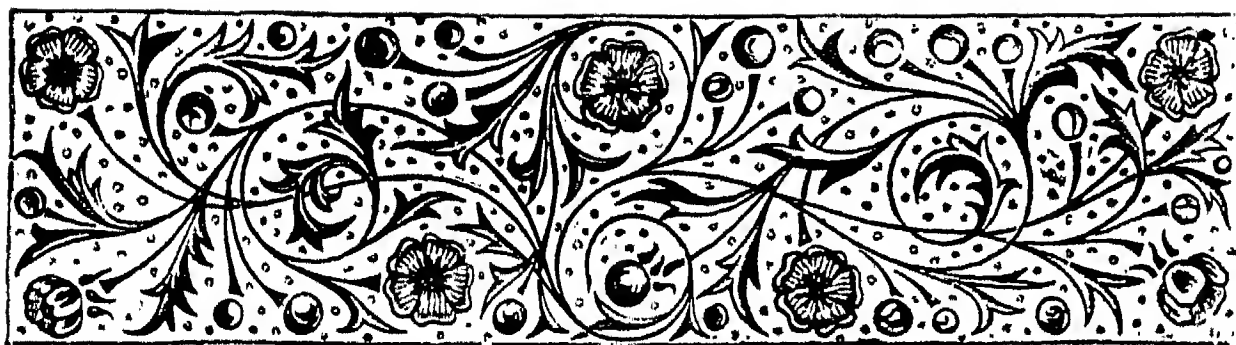
introduced, or that Madame Juberton had altered her religion.

The day of departure arrived. With many grumblings, and a few tears, Madame Juberton prepared the farewell meal for her guests, as well as a provision of cakes and sweetmeats for Elias's special delectation on the road. The dear child must eat, she said, if they hoped to keep up his strength. And *there* was the difficulty. For the child said, 'I *will* eat,' and then left his plate almost untouched.

As they sat, equipped for their journey, the remnants of their meal on the table, Madame Juberton hurried in, bringing with her the final *chef d'œuvre* of her dessert—an enormous *pâté*—which crowned with its majestic dome of delicate crust the largest pie-dish in her pantry. It was her farewell 'goodie' for Elias, the last of a stately line, but the last.

She put it down in front of him, and placed his hand upon it. And when he had realized what it was, exclaiming, 'Oh, what a big *pâté*. I never can eat it all, madame!' she pressed down his fingers, down through the crashing pie-crust, into something soft, and slippery, and woolly. Something that snapped at those fingers and then licked them. I don't think the something bit them. I fancy it understood.

Madame Juberton has never taken another dog.



CHAPTER VII.

STEPMOTHERS.

‘AND now what next?’ It was the question which Hendrik Lossell kept repeatedly putting to himself as he sat opposite the child in the train. He found it difficult to look at that miserable face without a sensation of petulant disgust. However ashamed he might be of the thought, he could not entirely suppress a feeling of anger towards the child for being what he was.

‘It is not his fault,’ he said to himself a hundred times over; ‘but——’

He hesitated. The expression itself, ‘it is

not his fault,' struck him in the face with a momentary tingle of self-reproach.

Elias must decide for himself whether he would rather return home or remain with Johanna. In the latter case a little cottage would be prepared for him at a short distance from his father's house. But what did he himself prefer?

'Are we going back to mamma?' he had asked once—only once.

His father had indicated to him that this was the case. No expression of feeling, whether pleasant or painful, had been called to his face by the news.

Yet Lossell had noticed that the child's countenance was capable of expressing many changes of emotion. And, most remarkable of all, it had soon become evident that Elias distinguished the touch of some persons whenever or wherever they touched him. This faculty had developed itself extraordinarily in the first weeks of his blindness;

but he had always, ever since he had lost his hearing, manifested an extreme delicacy of nervous perception. If Johanna, for instance, stole behind him and laid her hand on his shoulder, his face would instantly light up with a glad smile of recognition. He recognised the touch of her hand among all others, even without lifting his own to feel it. They tried in vain to mystify him on the subject. The only result was that he got to know Madame Juberton also, to that worthy lady's inexpressible delight.

Elias said little on the journey. Only now and then he ejaculated 'Tonnerre,' and the accent with which he spoke the word would have amply rewarded the widow could she have heard it. He had been very angry because they wanted him to travel with a green shade—a useless precaution of the Geneva oculist's—and he had torn it off and kicked it from him. But later on he had meekly resumed it, for his father had not had

the courage to disappoint him when he asked whether it would do his eyes good and make them see sooner than otherwise.

As they neared their destination, Elias seemed to awake from his apathy, and began to manifest signs of agitation. He crept closer to Johanna, and nestled up against her, and then, unexpectedly, and with an evident effort, he asked whether Johanna was going to stay. .

The maid looked quickly towards her master, the same question palpitating into her own cheeks with a flush of burning appeal. How often had she longed to receive a response to this demand of her heart! Hendrik Lossell could hesitate no longer. He signed to the nurse to press her charge's hand.

‘Of course,’ said Elias quietly, ‘I could not do without you, Johanna, as long as I am like this. And when I can see again, I shall come and visit you very often, as often as I may.’

The woman could only press his hand again, and cast grateful glances towards the merchant. The naïve, childish egotism did not hurt her ; it was only natural.

‘ That binds me to one condition in any case,’ thought the father. ‘ Wherever the boy remains, this woman must remain with him. But in the meantime, and as long as he himself makes no difficulties, I must take him home, whether Judith likes it or not.’

Judith did not like it. Of that there could be no doubt. And surely it was impossible altogether to disagree with her when she said that the two healthy, noisy children and their deaf and blind half-brother were not fitting companions for each other. She stood in the hall with the martyred air of a woman who is resolved to have her own way.

A female servant helped Elias to alight. ‘ Is it mamma?’ he asked, as he took the outstretched hand.

The woman pressed his fingers, and he, mistaking this pressure for the sign of affirmation to which he had now become so accustomed, put up his face to be kissed. The maid stooped down and kissed him—almost involuntarily.

‘Jans!’ cried Mevrouw Lossell, in stern indignation, from the top of the steps. The housemaid started and blushed. ‘Bring the young Heer to me,’ commanded her mistress.

And Jans carefully guided the boy to his stepmother, whose outstretched hand he took indifferently, thinking she was one of the servants, and never dreaming of putting up his cheek again.

‘Poor child!’ said Mevrouw, not without some genuine pity at the actual sight of her stepson. ‘He has become completely idiotic already. I know Pillenaar always feared it would end like that.’

‘Where are Henkie and Hubbie?’ queried

Elias, turning his sightless eyes as if he would look for them in the hall.

‘Not so idiotic, after all,’ thought his step-mother quickly. ‘He does not ask after me because he does not care to know. His physical condition is very sad, very sad indeed. But he never had an amiable character, and it has been altogether warped by his infirmities.’

Judith Lossell did not wish to be unkind to her stepchild. Nor was she unkind to him. She treated him with exemplary forbearance. She kissed him cheerfully, when kissing was unavoidable. His clothes and his toys were quite as good as Henkie's and Hubbie's. Only she did not love him, that was all.

Do not let us be unjust. There is no law why stepmothers should love their husbands' children. On the contrary, there exists every reason for them not to do so. If they have no children of their own, they are jealous of the dead woman in her grave, and if they

have children of their own, they want the living father to admire their children most. If the father doesn't, then jealousy of the first wife naturally steps in again.

There is no reason, if you come to think of that, why anybody should love anybody else, and, as a rule, they don't, unless the other person is a bit of themselves, either by choice, in the shape of passion, or by fate, in the shape of birth. And this intense egotism of the human race explains the frantic admiration of our own offspring which goes by the name of 'a mother's love,' and which never by any chance extends to anybody else's progeny. Why doesn't somebody feel a mother's love for somebody else's motherless babe?

No, there is every reason, on the contrary, why we should dislike each other as soon as we begin to argue about it. For in all of us the disagreeable largely predominates over the agreeable side. I know it

does in me, because I have frequently been assured of the fact. And if you are not as certain of the matter in your case, that merely proves, not that you are more agreeable than I am, but that my friends are more disagreeable than yours. More truthful, if you like, but I shan't scratch out my word because you prefer a synonym. I don't know your friends, still, I have no reason to doubt the possibility of their being more amiable than mine.

If, then, the disagreeable predominates, we dislike people as soon as we begin to argue about them. Fortunately, we rarely take the trouble to think our friends out, and that accounts for our retaining them. But this, nevertheless, is the whole solution of the stepmother question. A stepmother is always arguing about her stepchildren's right and wrong. She never argues about her own children.

If she is a good woman, she will do all

she can to persuade herself that she is harsh. And the very effort will make all the blemishes stand out more.

I heard a good soul say the other day that a friend of hers must be fond of her step-children, because she was so very kind to them—kinder frequently than to her own. As if she would have been so very kind to them if she had loved them! As if any mother was ever kind to her own children! There are plenty of unkind mothers, mind you; but there never yet was a mother who was 'kind.'

There was a lady once who said to her little daughter, as they came out of the pastrycook's :

'Give that remnant of tart to yon poor little girl, darling! you have had more than is good for you already, and you know, besides, that you don't care much for this sort.'

'Thank you, kind lady!' said the street-

girl, as she seized on the cake. And she was right—that lady was ‘kind.’

There is another wide field which lies next to this one of the world’s stepmothers, a far wider field, whose sterility can be demonstrated in the same manner; it belongs to the world’s mothers-in-law. We have to do here with another form of the very identical disease, but we are not going to speak of it, because that would lead to digressions, and digressions are excrescences and excrescences are faults.

A digression already? Nay, this has been anything but a digression—it is of the very essence of the character of Judith Lossell and her relation to the hero of the tale.

Yet it is an awful thought—one word only, forgive it—it is a thought which must trouble many a thinking man as he lies upon his bed through the long hours of the night—that, while but few people are troubled with

stepchildren, almost everyone possesses—or is possessed by—a mother-in-law.

For shame! this is cynical talk, which leaves no one the better for its utterance—except, perhaps, the cynic. But if that be true, it is an impertinence here. And therefore peccavi. If the fire will but cease smoking, and the tea-kettle commence singing, if that rat-tat at the front-door will but bring me—not a bill I thought I had paid, as the last one did—but a letter, let us say, from the dear old mother at home—*my* mother—I don't care tuppence about anybody else's—we shall have no more cynical talk.

Judith Lossell was very kind to Elias, all the kinder because she was resolved to remove him from the family circle, and 'place him under proper care.'

Oh, by-the-bye, dear stepmother, whoever

you are, who read this, don't write to me to say that *you* have always loved *your* step-children as much as your own. I know you have. I didn't mean you.

But, despite all the efforts to make him comfortable, Elias was not happy at home. They could not procure him happiness—that was natural—but they could not even spare him those additional annoyances which he had not felt whilst abroad. On the evening of his arrival, after he had repeatedly asked for them, the twins were brought to him half asleep.

‘I disapprove of it,’ said Judith sharply—
‘I disapprove of it altogether. The children are just going to bed. This is not the moment to frighten them, Hendrik, and cause, perhaps, a lasting estrangement.’

‘If he asks for them, he must have them,’ replied the Town Councillor shortly. And he stepped across the room, and rang the bell.

The issue proved Mevrouw Lossell right. Henkie and Hubbie, called down at so unusual a moment, shrank away from the still figure sitting unconscious in the shade. They hung back—fortunately, he could not see that—and then, as their father forcibly pushed them forward, they shrieked out in abject terror—fortunately he could not hear that.

‘I will not have it, Hendrik,’ cried Mevrouw Lossell, starting up with indignant eyes. Her husband hesitated.

‘And the boys? When are they coming to see me?’ asked Elias again, speaking out into the void, as was his habit—what else could he do? That question, suddenly issuing from the living tomb before them, even as they were unwillingly drawing nearer to it, completely upset the two children. They broke loose from their father, and fled to their mother for protection, screaming to be taken away. And she

drew them towards her and out of the room, leaving Hendrik Lossell standing undecided, staring stupidly at the wreck of his eldest son.

Elias, though unable to realize this and similar scenes, soon began to understand that his little brothers did not care to play with him, and that they did not come when he called. It was a great trouble to him, but he retreated into his solitude with all the sensitiveness of disease. He shared that solitude with Johanna and Tonnerre. The last-mentioned personage, unfortunately, had merited disgrace by his aggressive behaviour towards Mevrouw Lossell's fluffy lapdog. He had growled at the lapdog, and when the lapdog growled back, he had flown at him. Elias, alone in the room with them, had remained entirely unconscious of the catastrophe. And his stepmother, descending suddenly upon the combatants, had beaten Tonnerre. Of this also Elias knew

nothing, but he soon found out that his friend was not happy except with him.

Johanna, of course, was impudent. This anyone could have foreseen. It was inevitable that mistress and maid should disagree about Elias and his wants, and, as Johanna was a 'menial,' and Judith a 'Mevrouw,' there could not be the slightest doubt that the former would be 'impudent,' or would, in any case, find herself designated as such.

So Johanna and Elias and Tonnerre soon got to spend their days together in a big room at the top of the house which had been set aside for their use. There was not much opportunity for out-door life now, for when the year is dying at Clarens, it has been dead for some time in Holland, where, in fact, its health has never been very robust. And Elias refused, even more vehemently than before, to go out into the streets, now he was back in a place where everybody knew him. He would creep down the

garden-path occasionally—‘foot by foot,’ as they say in Holland—leaning on his nurse’s arm. But, for the most part, he sat upstairs, immovable, and waited for the doctor.

And the doctor came, and looked very learned, and examined his eyes, and felt his pulse.

‘It is the brain,’ said the doctor. ‘It is the brain.’

The sentence was not a long one, but it only cost half-a-crown, for doctors are not expensive in Holland, as a rule.

‘And, Johanna, when does he think I shall see again?’ asked Elias. ‘Next week?’

Constantly, Johanna found herself placed between silence and a lie.

‘I shall tell him,’ she said. ‘Some day. Soon. I cannot agree with his father. Surely it is much better he should know.’

‘When he knows, he knows for ever,’ said Hendrik Lossell.

The merchant grew daily more tender-hearted towards his child under the influence of the spectacle of the servant-maid's love.

‘It brings her in two hundred and fifty florins and her keep,’ he said to himself. ‘And what a lot she supplies for the money! It is a cheap thing, is love!’

Ah, indeed, dear merchant, it is a cheap thing, is love—the cheapest thing on earth—and the one we pay most dearly for, when the final reckoning comes.





CHAPTER VIII.

COUSIN COCOA.

AND then Mevrouw Lossell's cousin came to see Elias, the chocolate-manufactureess. She was very self-confident and important, was this lady, and that seems only natural, for her husband's chocolate was the very best in the world, as is the chocolate of everybody who manufactures chocolate at all. Chocolate and cocoa are just like sweethearts. Each is better than all the others. In fact, there is no better ; there is only everybody's individual best.

Mevrouw Lossell did not fully appreciate Mevrouw van Bussen's sterling qualities.

For Mevrouw van Bussen's great merit consisted in knowing better than all her neighbours what was good for them and their children, and this admirable characteristic Mevrouw Lossell had never succeeded in finding out. Yet Mevrouw Lossell's obtuseness in no way diminished Mevrouw van Bussen's ardour. The latter lady, in fact, only pulled all the more energetically in the right direction, the more she saw infatuated beings turn towards the wrong one.

'There's none' so blind as those that won't see,' she said, when they carried off Elias to Clarens.

And she also said it when they brought him back again. She meant Elias's step-mother, not Elias.

'I shall go and call on Judith Lossell this afternoon,' said this good lady to her husband at breakfast. 'There are a hundred other things I ought to do, undoubtedly,

but I shall leave them all and go and call on Judith Lossell.'

'I should do what I ought to,' remarked her husband quietly.

He was a very worthy man. He had never looked farther than the tip of his own nose ; and it was a short one.

'I mean "ought to," if I consulted my own convenience,' retorted Mevrouw van Bussen ; 'but I rarely find occasion to do that.'

'Can't always neglect it,' said the chocolate-maker, with his mouth full.

'If you mean to insinuate, Titus, that I do not look after my own household,' flashed out his wife, 'I can only advise you to go and stay for three days with the Lossells. I only advise you to. And she with her two children and a half to my ten !'

'Why should I go and stay with them when we live in the same town, Amelia?' asked Titus. 'I wish you would give me some more tea. And, if you are going, you

might take Elias a box of chocolates. I'll send you one up from the office.'

'Never!' cried Mevrouw, energetically pouring out the tea. 'That woman would say—behind my back—that I had poisoned the child. I know she sent for a tin of Van Houten's cocoa the other day from the grocer's. I know she did, for my sister Waalwyk's cook heard it from the Overests' servant, who was in the shop at the time.'

'Never mind,' said Van Bussen good-naturedly. 'Ours is the best. Van Houten is well enough, when you can't get ours.'

By-the-bye, a strange misfortune befell our good friend Van Bussen the other day. He had paid the Koopstad Tramcar company a swinging price to have boards put up outside all their trams with 'Van Bussen's Cocoa is the best' in enormous letters. And when the contract had been signed and sealed, and made hard and fast for a twelvemonth, there came

his hated Rotterdam rival, and he paid the company a still swinginger price to have *his* boards put up just under the other man's. And on these boards was written in yet more enormous letters: 'When you can't get Van Swink's.'

The company's shareholders now all drink Van Swink's concoction. He says in his advertisements that his cocoa is 'grateful.' It is difficult to say what that may mean, but it is certain that the shareholders are.

'I shall not make any allusion to her unthankfulness,' said Mevrouw van Bussen to herself, as she marched off to her cousin's. She was alluding to Judith Lossell's purchase of the rival brand; 'I should consider it beneath me to do so. And it's her loss, not mine, if she ruins her children's healths. On my part, I will do what I can for them. "Strive to do good, and you'll learn to do better," as the Domine said so beautifully

last Sabbath. But Judith doesn't even strive. I wish Titus would go to church with me more regularly. He says it interferes with his Sunday rest. And yet it needn't do that.'

Her thin lips pinched themselves together into a contortion which no one but a connoisseur in facial expression would have understood to be a smile, as there rose up before her mental vision that long line of reposeful faces which nodded down at her for a couple of hours every Sunday from the pews where the gentlemen of Koopstad sat enthroned—such of them as went to church. Male Hollanders seldom do, for the service consists almost entirely of sermon, and they probably get enough of that at home in the week.

'Well, how do you do, Elias?' said 'Cousin Cocoa,' as the little Lossells called her. She had just been ushered into the room where the child sat alone with his dog.

In spite of all her cleverness, Mevrouw van Bussen constantly forgot either the boy's deafness or his blindness in her occasional intercourse with him. Now, however, in the unaltered silence, she realized, and blushed over, her mistake. She was one of those people who are so convinced of their own superiority that, to appear foolish, even to themselves, for ever so brief a moment, is absolute suffering to them. Fortunately, with this kind of people, the moment is always very brief indeed, and it leaves no scar.

She stood hesitating near the door. There was a strange dog on Elias's lap, and this creature, a bundle of odds and ends of brown untidyness, sat up and growled at her. Mevrouw van Bussen had nerves of iron; it was something else in her then—her calves, perhaps—that lived in constant terror of little dogs. We are all of us afraid of something—even the bravest—afraid of

either of these two: the indefinitely great, or the infinitesimally small.

‘Who is there?’ said Elias. ‘Come and feel my hand, please.’

He could always perceive the entry of someone into the room—the opening and shutting of a door, or any other sudden displacement of air being felt by him, though he could not hear it.

Mevrouw van Bussen shrank back before Tonnerre’s redoubled growls, and Elias vainly repeated his question. Then, suddenly frightened by the unexpected continuance of silence, smitten by one of those panics which complete helplessness is apt to produce, he started up from his chair, crying out:

‘To the rescue! Danger! Thieves!’ and fell over a footstool in his haste to get away, bringing down with him in his fall a column with a favourite statuette of his stepmother’s. Tonnerre flew straight at Mevrouw van

Bussen, who, skipping back all too rapidly, with her skirts drawn tightly round her, sat down suddenly in a bowl of flowers.

Upon this confusion entered Judith Lossell, as placid as concealed vexation can manage to be—terribly placid.

‘Yes; the child’s condition is a great affliction,’ she said smoothly, as she helped up her dripping cousin out of the pool of water and broken glass. ‘I am sorry you could not help frightening him, as you say, for that flower-basket was given me by my sister who is dead, and the statuette had been my mother’s, as you may remember. Not that it matters; only, of course, one gets attached to these things. Oh no, I should not say your mantle was *entirely* spoilt, not if you take out the stained part, and put in another piece, although I fear you will not be able to match the colour exactly—it is such a—a—*peculiar* colour. Be quiet, do!’—here she turned fiercely on

Tonnerre, who had never left off barking—
'that miserable animal is the worry of my
life. Oh yes; he certainly bites!—he nearly
killed my poor little "Fox"—never mind;
I can't help it. I don't fancy he will bite
you, Amelia, but if he does, you must
bear it.'

'Judith!' cried Amelia, in disgust and
admiration. She was whisking round and
round in futile efforts to get a full view of
the damage to her mantle, and Tonnerre,
who believed she was attempting to amuse
him, was whisking after her in jumps and
snaps. She stopped suddenly.

'My dear, I cannot help it. I am not
the master of the house,' rejoined Judith,
more placidly still. She had picked up
Elias, and was doing her best to reassure
him by kisses and caresses. This was her
duty, and she fulfilled it in the most ex-
emplary manner. Even after he had settled
down again contentedly on the sofa, she

gave him two more kisses than her duty required. These, therefore, were supererogatory, and doubtless were written down as such.

Not till Tonnerre had been turned into—and a cane-bottomed chair had been fetched out of—the hall (for not even the removal of the mantle had rendered this latter precaution superfluous) did Mevrouw van Bussen resume her efforts to enter into communication with little Elias. Then, however, she sat down by his side, and guided his hand over her face.

Mevrouw van Bussen had the bulbousest of bulbous noses. As soon as the blind child's hand reached it, he exclaimed, in accents partly of vexation and partly of amusement:

‘Why, it's only Cousin Cocoa, mamma!’

The reaction from the alarm he had just experienced threw him completely off his guard.

The chocolate-makeress appreciated neither the 'contentment' of the 'only,' nor the humour of the nickname thus suddenly flung in her face. She was smarting with the humiliation of her cousin's broken crockery, and she sprang delightedly at the retaliation of a grievance of her own. She let go little Elias's hand.

'I am sorry to perceive, Judith,' she said, bristling up, 'that you encourage your children to speak disrespectfully of me. I have always considered such matters from a very different point of view. When my children began to speak of Elias here as "Deaffy," I put it down at once with a high hand, though he could not even hear it, and I whipped one of the boys, with great pain (to myself), when he disobeyed me. I see now that I might have spared my wrath; not that I wish to do evil lest good should come, but it is evident that you do not consider it necessary to punish your children for the

faults of mine, or rather, I mean, that what is a punishment for my children should be a fault in yours. I mean that the faults of my punishment——'

'Exactly,' said Judith, in her clearest voice.

Mevrouw van Bussen preferred to scramble out of her muddle as quickly as possible.

'And even this afternoon,' she went on excitedly, 'I came here, only actuated by the sincerest interest in that child's welfare, though I am no cousin of his, whether Cocoa or otherwise! I had better go, Judith, since I am an object of derision and a source of amusement. Do not, pray, think I am vexed with Elias; I pity him far too much for that, but I certainly am of opinion that your children——'


'Of course, if you wish to go, I shall not detain you,' interrupted Mevrouw Lossell, as her visitor rose while speaking, 'but I should advise you to consider the desirability of

waiting till your dress is dried. The stain shows, you know—ahem—when you get up.'

Mevrouw van Bussen sat down again with great rapidity, and said :

'I cannot understand, my dear cousin, why you have never tried the experiment of treating Elias's case homœopathically.'

'You remember, dear cousin,' replied Judith, 'that I experimented on Henkie's chilblains homœopathically at your request. I gave the child sips of *vox populus* and *bella-donna* alternately every half hour for a week, and somebody was always upsetting the tumblers with their paper covers, and making messes all over the room.'

Mevrouw Lossell's eyes wandered, perhaps involuntarily, to the stain on the carpet. 

'Not "*vox populus*," "*nux vomica*,"' said Mevrouw van Bussen, with a great air of superiority. 'Besides, the chilblains got better.'

'Yes, when the warm weather came round ;

but we had left off the medicines long before that.'

'After all, the homœopathic system is the only rational one,' said the chocolate-makeress, again branching off to smoother ground. "'Simile syllabubs," as my doctor always says, which, you know, means "cure like with like." Now, the reasonableness of that must strike everyone immediately. It "jumps to the eyes."'

'Why?' asked Judith.

'Oh, because—because—— Of course, it is a law of nature, like gravitation, and all that, you know! And I think—not that I wish to give you any advice on the matter—that the system might well be tried on Elias.'

'I can't make him blinder,' said Mevrouw Lossell, with a half-suppressed yawn. 'You could only put it into practice on a one-eyed person. Elias hasn't got any eyes left to put out, poor boy!'

‘You wilfully misapprehend me, Judith. You ought to give him phosphorus for his brain, and aconite for his—well, at any rate, certainly aconite.’

‘Oh, undoubtedly aconite!’ said Judith.

‘It is your business, after all, and not mine, if the child gets better. Not but that I would do anything in my power, anything—for I have ten children of my own—only I am afraid of appearing to meddle. I have spoken to my homœopathic doctor about the case, but he refuses to give an opinion until he has seen the patient. So I thought you might perhaps step down to his house with Elias one of these days. His hours are from one to three.’

‘Thank you,’ replied Mevrouw Lossell negligently. ‘I will put him down on my list. I shall hardly be able to get to him this week, because I already have nine physicians, previously recommended, and a magnetism-man and a somnambulist, not

to speak of Holloway's pills, and a family ointment. But as soon as your man's turn comes round, I shall give Elias his dose of aconite. Do you think I might give it him before the doctor says he is to have it, or do you deem it absolutely necessary to wait till after ?'

'Judith,' replied Mevrouw van Bussen, 'I will trouble you to ask your man to get me a cab. When you feel sorry, you had better come and tell me so.'

'I feel sorry already,' said Judith—'very sorry.' And again her eyes wandered towards the dark stain on the floor.

'I know all about your goings on, Judith,' continued Amelia, again making for the door. 'If you think Elias's health will improve upon inaction and Van Houten's cocoa, you will find out your mistake when it is too late.'

'I know,' said Judith, 'Van Bussen's is the best.'



CHAPTER IX.

ELIAS HEARS—THE TRUTH.

‘MAMMA,’ said Elias presently, from his corner in the great old-fashioned horse-hair sofa. ‘Mamma, do you know I feel sure Cousin Cocoa was cross because I called her Cousin Cocoa. I didn’t mean to, but I was so surprised, I quite forgot. I’m very sorry. I should have liked to tell her so, only I didn’t dare.’

From her seat by the window, Mevrouw Lossell looked round at the child without moving. She was vexed with him for tumbling about and breaking things. To tell the truth, he had already occasioned

several of these smashes, for his blindness was too recent as yet not to betray him from time to time. 'I do my best,' he said, 'but somehow the things get out of their distances.'

Mevrouw Lossell was in a very bad temper, not with him so much, as with fate, and with Mevrouw van Bussen. She was very cruelly used, she thought, in being saddled with this dead weight. Of course she was sorry for the child. She was extremely sorry. But did that, she asked her husband a dozen times over, forbid her being sorry for herself? When a man is egotistical, he sometimes feels ashamed of it. When a woman is egotistical, she never even notices that she is.

But the disease is much rarer in females, especially under a certain age.

'Yes, I wish I could have told her,' continued Elias; 'and, mamma, I am very sorry I broke the vase.'

‘He is a good child,’ soliloquized Mevrouw Lossell, ‘and he deserves to be happier than we can make him here. I shall tell Hendrik so once more to-night. I found him crying again yesterday, because the children wouldn’t play with him. They *can’t* play with him! How can he play, I should like to know? It is very sad for us all; but surely common-sense tells everyone but Hendrik that the boy will be better off outside the house.’

In the meantime Elias went on speaking, partly to himself.

‘I knew she was angry, because I can feel it,’ he said. ‘I feel it, somehow, when people are very cross with me, or when they are very good to me. Only, sometimes, I make mistakes. Sometimes, for instance, I fancy you are cross with me, when I know I haven’t done anything wrong, and then you come and kiss me, and so you see it’s all an idea of mine. I don’t like to think people

are cross with me, when they're not, mamma ; and I suppose it's very naughty.'

Judith Lossell went over and kissed her stepson. The colour had deepened upon her substantial face.

'It's nice that I can speak to people,' said Elias, with a weary sigh, 'but, what's the use, when nobody can ever speak to me? I want somebody to speak to me very badly. Nobody has said anything for ever so long.'

It was a yearning to which he had given utterance again and again, but this time the words were barely out of his mouth when he started up, his pale cheeks aglow with excitement, his whole frame trembling with the anxiety of the idea that possessed him.

'I must go upstairs to Johanna,' he stuttered. 'Please, please open the door, mamma. I can quite well find my way if you will let me out. I have got something

to ask her immediately. No ; I can't wait till she comes to fetch me. Oh, mamma, do you know I think I might—— Please, please let me out. Yes ; I have got the balustrade. No, I shan't——'

He was gone.

He fell up the stairs in his haste, crying 'Johanna ! Johanna !' through the house, and as she ran out on to the landing to meet him, he threw himself, gasping for breath, into her arms.

'Quick !' he cried ; 'make A against my cheek, Johanna. A with your fingers. A, B, C. Yes, yes. Quick ! put your hand so, up against my face. A, B, C. Not so fast. How stupid you are ! D. D now ; D, E. Oh, Johanna ! I can hear everything you say. I can hear quite well like that. Go on ; say something. Quick ! quick ! Oh, Johanna ! I am sure I can hear like that.'

He burst into tears, but still he held up

his sightless face, with the big drops coursing down it, and pressed her hand against his cheek. And she, in the agitation of the moment, could think of nothing to say but 'stockings,' and 'stockings,' she said, gazing steadfastly down at the unfinished one lying in her lap.

'K,' cried Elias, spelling out the Dutch word as she slowly formed the letters, laying her hands against his cheek — 'K — O — U — Not so fast. Do it over again. U — S. You said "stockings," Johanna. What made you say "stockings" ?'

He broke away from her, dancing round the table as best he could, and crying :

'Stockings ; what made you say stockings ? But I understood it quite well. I shall be able to hear them.'

He fell up against something in his triumphant dancing, and tumbled back into Johanna's arms, sobbing as if his heart would break.

‘Tell me quick,’ he sobbed, ‘why you said stockings. What made you say it, Johanna?’

It was the first word except ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ he had heard for several weeks.

The woman could only spell back to him ‘Nothing.’ Elias understood her.

‘Stockings? nothing?’ He grew impatient. ‘What do you mean, Johanna? Why can’t you say something to me? I want dreadfully to hear you say something to me. Oh, Johanna, how unkind you are!’

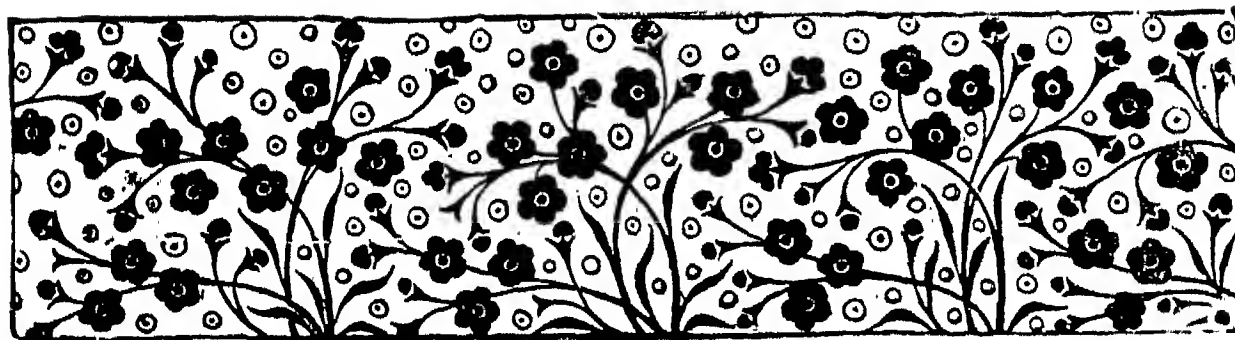
She folded him to her breast for only answer, and it was not till several minutes later that she began more calmly to practise with Elias this spelling of the deaf and dumb alphabet where he could feel, instead of seeing it. Presently she selected the side of his neck in preference to his cheek, and this communication once being established, she soon agreed with him upon slight alterations and simplifications better suited to these

peculiar circumstances. That, however, was the result of later considerations, when Elias had already got to understand whatever was said to him. It was not long before anyone who took the trouble to master these signs could converse with the boy, and soon he read them far quicker than they were given. And thus one great cloud rolled away from his darkness, and the stars came out again in the night.

‘And, Johanna,’ he said, when the first tremor of discovery was over, and he sat enjoying, as it can but rarely be enjoyed, the full delight of question and answer, ‘now tell me all the doctor says about my eyes. It is that I have been wanting to know most of all during the whole long time. And nobody ever told me—not really. Of course, he says I shall get better. But does he think it will be soon? Does he think they are better already?’

‘No, dear, you are not better,’ Johanna spelled back in return, with shaking fingers. ‘You must not think too much about getting better, Elias.’





CHAPTER X.

DR. PILLENAAR'S REVENGE.

FOR the next fifteen years Elias Lossell lived with Johanna and a middle-aged under-servant in a little cottage outside the town, where his father came and saw him daily. His stepmother came often—not daily—and his brothers came also, from time to time. The under-servant changed once or twice as the years passed on; Johanna, of course, remained, and the flow of Elias's life was almost as a lowland stream under an overhanging willow.

It had been decided that he should go and live thus not long after intercourse had been

re-established between him and the outside world. Judith Lossell believed to her dying day (she is dead ; she died some years before the great catastrophe) that this decision was the result of the scene between her and her husband when she told him—quietly, as was her manner, and without any screams or tears—that Henkie and Hubbie, despite their tender age, must be sent to boarding-school as soon as possible, for that the gloom of Elias's presence was ruining their infant livers—not lives ; it isn't a misprint ; but livers. Judith Lossell said so. Neither her printer nor her historian is responsible for what she said. If the chronicler of a woman's many words were responsible for all their foolishness, there would be more—alas ! no ; there are enough broken-brained geniuses already. There would be no chronicles written at all.

Judith Lossell, however, was mistaken. The decision had been taken without any

regard to her opinions, and it had been taken before the great scene, above-mentioned, came on. That the merchant had allowed his wife to fight it out, under the circumstances, was the result of his inability to inform her of his reasons. He was not accustomed to oppose her, and he positively preferred her to think that she had bullied him into submission. 'Anything for a quiet life,' said this Town Councillor, to whom everybody bent except his consort, but, none the less, he stuck to his original resolution that Elias himself should indicate what he preferred.

And this was how the matter was settled. They were alone together in the twilight, after dinner, the father and son. Henkie and Hubbie had just been sent off to bed, and their mother had followed 'to tuck them in.'

The merchant went over and spoke to the child.

‘You can always perceive when Johanna is in the room or when she touches you, can you not?’ he asked.

‘Yes, papa,’ said Elias.

‘And can you when your mother does so?’

‘No, papa.’

‘And me—I?’

A long pause.

‘Sometimes, papa.’

And so Elias went to live with Johanna. And Johanna played with him, and was his horse. Tonnerre also played with him. Henkie and Hubbie occasionally came, by their father’s orders, and they, too, would try to play with him. But Tonnerre did not approve of their coming, and persisted in barking at their shins.

At first, a master was procured for him who, without exactly giving what could be described as lessons, had instructions to slip into his conversation such scraps of the most

necessary information as could be conveyed in this desultory manner. The master was quite equal to the task thus entrusted to him, and the plan would undoubtedly have worked very satisfactorily had Elias's head been stronger. But he grew tired, and he could not remember. That was the worst of all. He could only remember what he knew by heart, what he had known for years, or what constantly repeated itself in his experience. Sometimes it almost appeared as if his development had remained stationary with the recurrence of his blindness. And then again something would come out which would prove that this was not the case. Yet he would speak of the autumnal glories of Clarens, as if he had beheld them yesterday, while his teacher would vainly ask for the fiftieth time :

‘Elias, what is the capital of France?’

An attempt to teach him reading and writing, according to the methods employed

among the blind, proved a failure. The writing, especially, with its confusing combination of dots, greatly excited and fatigued him. At the conclusion of one of these lessons, in which he had strained his powers to the uttermost in his nervous anxiety to succeed, he was laid prostrate by a feverish attack which caused the frightened Johanna to send for the nearest doctor, and then for Hendrik Lossell. The nearest doctor turned out to be Elias's old friend, Pillenaar. He came magnanimously, and he was in the sick-room when the merchant hurriedly entered it.

'You!' cried Lossell, thus suddenly thrown into the presence of the man he had wronged.

The doctor answered only by a repellent gesture, and continued to busy himself with his little patient. Hendrik Lossell walked away to the window and drummed his fingers against the pane. Presently he drew near

again, attracted against his will by the silent old man at the bedside.

‘Why are you here?’ he asked.

‘I was sent for,’ replied the physician quietly. ‘And a physician is not in the habit of asking where they are taking him, but why he is fetched.’ He spoke without looking up, and meanwhile he drew from under the patient’s arm the thermometer which had been resting there, and walked with it towards the light.

‘You cannot wish well to me or mine,’ persisted Lossell, ‘nor can it be an agreeable thought for me that the life of one of my children is in the hands of a man who probably thinks he owes me a bad turn.’

‘I am having my revenge,’ said the doctor quietly, as he turned back to the bed.

The father walked up and down for some moments with hesitating step. Then,

stopping near Pillenaar, he asked, with a visible effort :

‘Do you mean that you are hurting the child?’

The doctor paused in the act of measuring out some drops, and looked across at Lossell with eyes full of tranquil scorn: ‘Fool,’ he said.

The merchant received the word right in his face, like a well-aimed snowball. He started back. He was accustomed to being called ‘Worshipful Sir.’

He did not speak again, till the other got ready to go. Then he followed him downstairs, and asked, almost timidly, as they were nearing the hall-door :

‘Is the child very ill?’

The doctor stopped under the lamp, in the act of shaking himself into his overcoat: ‘No,’ he said. ‘Not now. The fever was very high, when I came, but we have already got it down half a degree. Did I not tell

you I was having my revenge? The boy will get better, Mynheer Lossell, but there will be no more lessons for him. His nurse tells me he is learning to read and write. I shall stop that. I have told her so. I shall give publicity to the facts that I found your son in this condition and that I have forbidden your continuing to "improve his mind." And if I find that you disregard my advice, I shall make public that little conversation of ours which led to your nearly ruining me in the mortgage affair. I have never mentioned it to anyone yet. But I shan't allow you to make away with this unfortunate son of yours. Did not I tell you that I was having my revenge? Good night.'

'Stop,' cried the wretched father, roused by these unmerited, yet excusable, taunts. 'You wrong me. Before God, you wrong me. It was no intention of mine to hurt the child. I do not deny that I would rather

he had died when he was first stricken down. It would have been happier, above all for him. If you think these years of wretchedness have been preferable, I cannot help differing from you. I was angry with you, chiefly for your manner. I was unreasonable. I admit it. But I have never lifted a hand against one hair of his head, neither then nor since!

* The doctor had stood curiously watching Hendrik Lossell's face.

'No,' he said, when the merchant ceased speaking, 'I dare say not. You are not one of those who kill, only one of those who cause to die. I can't fathom your whys and your wherefores, Right Worshipful Heer Lossell, but I know that, for some reason or other, you would rather have that poor unfortunate out of the way—do you dare deny it?'

The merchant winced. 'If Providence thought fit to call him to a happier sphere,'

he answered, 'once more, who would dare wish for his remaining here?'

'Providence!' interrupted the old doctor testily, 'Providence! That is only another word for "timely foresight." Your providence provides for yourself, Mynheer Lossell. But I advise it to look out.'

'I swear that it is false,' cried Lossell hotly. 'And to prove to you that you wrong me, as well as to shield myself from your attacks, I will follow your instructions in all things concerning the boy. Nobody else shall touch him in future. He has always retained a liking for you. Doctor him as much as you choose, and revenge yourself for any wrong I may have done you by charging me whatever sum you may please. Do you accept?'

The tea-merchant was indeed roused to an unusual pitch of agitation, or he would never have committed himself to so rash a proposal. But he was growing old—with worry, more

than with years—and his arithmetic was no longer as hard and fast as it used to be.

‘I accept,’ said Doctor Pillenaar, after a moment’s hesitation, ‘for the child’s sake. My charge is a dollar a visit. And you know it.’

No more lessons. No more struggling after fleeting images, that ran and ran, the harder he strove to retain them. Repose, and fresh air, and tranquil enjoyments—and then a blissful feeling as if the ache were almost gone.

It was Dr. Pillenaar who called in another great medicine-man to come and see Elias, not an oculist, this time, but a learned professor of ‘psychiatry.’ Very few people in Koopstad knew what was meant by psychiatry; it may be doubted whether the wise man himself did, though he was professor of it. An impression got about, however, that a phrenologist had been sent for

to feel Elias's bumps, and Koopstad was perfectly satisfied, though some people did say they would never have thought it of Doctor Pillenaar. 'Elias has had one bump on his head, I should think, which could explain the whole matter,' said Henkie. Henkie was an unfeeling lad. Hubbie looked away. He did not like people to speak of that terrible story, which was so old, and yet daily so new.

'It is the brain,' said the professor, saying nothing new, but charging a couple of hundred florins for saying it—and therein will ever lie a subtle comfort for those of us who can afford to pay for it, and especially for those who can't. 'It is the brain. There is undoubtedly a permanent lesion, and probably, in connection with that, as an outcome, yes, I should say, as an outcome of it'—he frowned deeply—'a slow malformation of the brain. Has this deterioration ceased—or has it not? that, honoured colleague, is

the question which, if I understand aright, you are desirous of seeing solved?'—Pillenaar nodded acquiescence, a little impatiently

‘It is a question requiring mature consideration, and requiring, above all, as many data as can possibly be procured. Let us—ahem—have luncheon first, and then we can talk the whole matter over at our ease, as, if we reckon half an hour for the meal, I shall still have twenty minutes till my train leaves for—ahem—home.’

They called in Hendrik Lossell, as soon as their conference had been hurried over, and they told him the result.

‘Nothing could be settled with any degree of certainty. On the whole, it was probable, judging by the experience of the last years, that the boy’s brain would still suffer further derangement. It might safely be assumed, however, that such alteration, if it did occur, would manifest itself very tardily. Years

might elapse before any noticeable change took place. On the other hand, the patient might'—the professor paused and glanced inquiringly from the father to Dr. Pillenaar. The latter motioned to him to proceed—'the patient might lose other senses, as he had already lost these. The eyes were sound; the ears were intact, the mischief therefore lay in the channels of communication between these organs and the central consciousness. It was possible, however, that the work of destruction had now come to a standstill. It was also possible that, if it continued, the patient might lapse into idiocy'—Dr. Pillenaar nodded. 'The great man did not think this was likely, too long a period having already elapsed. More could not be said with certainty. But what had been said before was certain, taking the accompanying restrictions into account. And, if the cab was waiting?—thank you—perhaps it would be better to wake the cabman.'

‘I understand,’ said Lossell, confusedly following the great light of science, ‘that only the brain is diseased?’

‘Certainly. Undoubtedly. Probably. Of course. The constitution is healthy, not absolutely robust, but far from unsound. Rather the reverse. Remarkably sound. With care the child may live to be a hundred. It is this very fact of his general healthiness that proves there must be some local flaw.’

‘Then, could we not,’ stammered the merchant on the steps, ‘could we not—as I see the great doctors do in Vienna—with stomachs, you know, insert new ones of—of pigskin—it’s in all the papers—could we not renovate the diseased part of the brain—remove it, you know, and—and insert new—piece, professor!’

‘Pig’s brains?’ queried the professor. His cab was coming up to the front-steps. ‘Well, hardly. And what use would they be to

your son, my dear sir, if he had them? How could he become a doctor or a lawyer or a parson, with the brains of a pig?

‘I don’t want him to become that,’ said Hendrik Lossell, innocently pursuing his direct line of thought, without deferring to his companion’s. ‘I want him to become a merchant like myself.’

‘No, no; he would only do for a doctor,’ interposed Pillenaar bitterly.

‘We have not got quite as far as that yet,’ said the student of the human soul (seen from the outside), as he settled himself in his conveyance. ‘Nor has the Vienna doctor, whatever he may do in ten years’ time. But we have done great things, none the less, in psychiatry, very great things indeed, considering’ — he added complacently — ‘that nobody ever did anything before us.’

‘And what have you done?’ asked Lossell, thinking discontentedly of his departed bank-notes, the open carriage-door in his hand.

‘We have classified, my dear sir. We have classified. And we have found a great number of people to be mad whom nobody ever imagined to be mad before.’

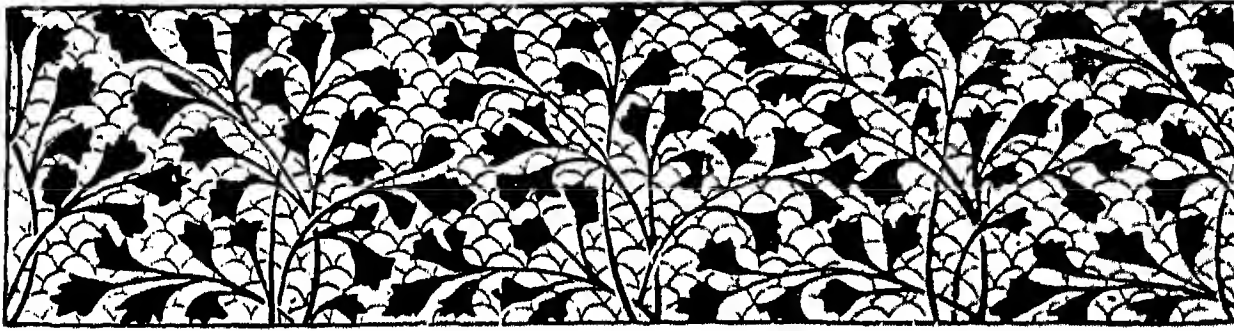
‘And have you,’ asked Lossell, ‘found a good many so-called mad people to be sane?’

‘Well no, hardly that,’ replied the ‘psychiater,’ somewhat taken aback, ‘hardly that, no. I should scarcely say that. Would you tell him to drive to the Northern Station? Thank you. I am much obliged to you. I have not the slightest doubt your boy will do very well indeed.’

The carriage drove away. ‘We have been born too early,’ said Lossell sadly, as he turned into the house. ‘It is our misfortune. If we had only lived twenty years later, the doctors would have spoken of a new brain for Elias, as the parsons now speak of a new heart, and he would

have been a good man of business yet, and all would have been well.' He sighed heavily. 'And now all is wrong,' he said.





CHAPTER XI.

'LIKE A STREAM UNDER A WILLOW-TREE.'

AND so Elias grew up, with the old brain that would not work as it ought to, watched-over and cared for in his daily needs and perplexities by Johanna's motherly affection, and protected, from a distance, by Doctor Pillenaar, against all mistakes and misconceptions. After some years Tonnerre died, of old age, and that was the first intense grief he had known since his blindness. His father obtained for him—at great expense and at almost greater pains—an exactly similar little animal from a London dealer who probably stole it as a last resource—but

Elias would have none of the little stranger. 'It was ungrateful of him,' said Judith Lossell, 'after all the trouble his father had taken.' And therein she was right. She was always right; and you always had a sneaking feeling that she ought to have been wrong. She had a talent for stating tiresome truths that nobody wanted to believe.

It was disagreeable for her, too, to find this deaf duffer, this blind idiot that nobody wanted to live, outgrowing her own children daily in health and strength and outer beauty. For Hendrik and Hubert — Henkie and Hubbie no longer — had developed into little business-mannikins such as you can find in any number, if you care to look, on the exchange and mart of Koopstad. They were small and spare, with close-cropped heads and yellow complexions, and they smelt of 'Jockey Club.' They were over-dressed, into just that shade of over-dressing which is peculiar to the sons of merchant-princes.

They had aristocratic tastes, for they hated the Jews, and never swallowed a glass of wine without saying that it might have been better ; and they knew all about everybody and everything.

Elias, on the contrary, living in God's great solitude of boundless fresh air and almost unbroken silence, grew up with such a frame as we all might be troubled with, were civilization not there to refine us. From a puny, pale-faced laddie he developed into a man of six feet two, with a chest like a drum and a voice like a trumpet, a man with the limbs of—no, no, not those eternalized effeminate appendages of a Greek god—with the limbs of an old Batouwer from the forests by the Rhine. And there was something unavoidably affecting in the combination of this great display of physical strength with a certain timidity of movement—alas, much of the old childish grace was gone!—and a slight stoop of the head,

the natural results of his blindness. He had retained that golden shimmer over his curly locks which so seldom outstays the golden sunshine of childhood, and his face had grown handsome with the repose of harmonious lines. The sightless eyes were usually closed; for long hours he would sit thus silent, curtained from that outer world he could not gaze upon; but it was when he swept up the long-lashed eyelids that you understood how it came that women called the blind fool, Elias Lossell, the most beautiful man in Koopstad.

He had inherited, with his mother's rather insignificant regularity of feature, the fathomless splendour of his father's eyes—those eyes that had purchased Volderdoes Zonen. But in the son's unillumined orbs there slept a sadness, a tender, pitiful pleading, irresistible as that attraction of deep, dark water which compels you to look again. It was impossible to realize that such glory of love and

sorrow could fall back upon the beholder from a soulless mirror. And who shall say, indeed, that these tranquil depths could give forth none of their own inner light because they could receive none from the radiance around them? It was that gentle, fugitive pleading which broke across the stillness, like a ripple on a lake, a something indefinite, something lacking, like a prayer and a regret, that moved you to the very centre of your being, you could scarcely have reasoned out why. Eyes that look forth upon the world's little ups and downs are swept by every change of sentiment; only sightless repose could burn with such a steadfast flame of sadness, and of love that conquers regret.

How well I remember those eyes of Elias Lossell's—nay, forgive the epic poet that the strength of a personal reminiscence should break through your neat little rules—I have good cause to remember. For they did me brave service once, many years ago, when I

was not as old, and therefore not as wise, a man as I have become since. I had been to hear a stupid lecture, which had impressed me very much, because there were a number of scientific terms in it which I could not understand, and which, therefore, I knew must all contain as many undeniable truths. It was all about the origin of man, and it had proved to me—irrefutably—that I, like the rest of the human race, was nothing but a perfected cell. I could appreciate that argument—about life, and humanity, being a gigantic sell. In my darker moments I had often reasoned it out for myself. And there was nothing but matter and force, and nothing worth living for, except life. It was all very beautiful and simple, and you had only got to persuade yourself you liked it, even when you had the toothache or the heartache, and there you were. I was thinking it over, and wondering to myself why I could not immediately realize that that perfected

anthropoid ape, Graziella (my heart's queen at the moment ; I found out afterwards that her name was Jane), was not a bit more perfected than all other she-anthropoid apes. I was reproaching myself with my foolishness in not comprehending more readily that there was nothing inside anybody's body except that body itself. I understood perfectly how all my good and evil instincts had developed themselves out of my original cellular ancestor, and, the particulars having got somewhat jumbled in my head, I was ready to affirm that I owed my dislike of mint-sauce to the wolf's disagreeable habit of eating his lamb raw, and my short-sightedness to the eagle's equally unreasonable custom of staring needlessly at the sun. For I had understood the lecturer to say distinctly that everybody was descended from everybody else, and that all our qualities could be explained by the fact that somebody else had had them before us. In fact, I was converted to the very

latest scientific discoveries of that day. Two years afterwards I happened to hear the same lecturer again, and I found that he was most anxious to tell us that all he had told us last time had been proved to be wrong. I could have told him that sooner. I had learned it, not from a wise man, but from a fool. And I had found my soul again, while he was still looking for his. I heard him say that he quite expected to light upon it soon in the development of the carrier-pigeon out of the pigeon that can't carry anything at all. I believe this has actually happened since, for I was informed the other day that he was perfectly happy in a scientific squabble with a brother inventor—I mean discoverer—who maintains that, wherever the soul of man may be, the soul of woman can distinctly be traced to the pouter.

I was wandering down the street, then, with a jumble of these latter-day truths in my head, when I suddenly remembered that

Elias Lossell had been unwell of late, and that I had promised my mother to go and inquire after him. So I walked out of the town towards the house where he lived, and I found him sitting up by his fire, for he was better. I talked with him a little—you could always get Johanna to interpret—and then I lapsed into silence, facing him, with only the hearth between us. And presently, in the darkness and confusion of my thoughts, he lifted his drooping eyes and turned them full upon me—turned them with their sightless immensity of a sorrow that has conquered itself. I got up, and pressed his hand, and went out. And ever since, though I respect the earthworm no less, nor the domestic pigeon, nor even the tailless ape, I believe that the humblest human intellect is the servant of a soul which sprang from God, and that the loftiest is nothing more.

Elias had fortunately a small number of

hobbies which were practicable even to his enfeebled intellect. Chief of these, strangely enough, was the amusement—for with him it could not be called an art—of gardening. His great delight was to potter about in a small bit of garden, with the aid of a gardener, and to plant combinations of brilliant colour, which his eye could never behold. He would feel the flowers carefully, and request that they might be minutely described to him; then he would set to work, taking them one by one from the heaps in which his assistant had laid them and arranging them according to his fancy. And thus it was also his supreme enjoyment to make up his own flowers into nosegays and send them to anyone that had shown him kindness. But he could never remember for any length of time where the various kinds had been planted, and had to ask day after day, if they were in bloom.

And gradually a number of pets were

gathered around him, not to fill up Tonnerre's place, but to live and die beside him. For Elias could never remember that Tonnerre was dead, and, when a new dog was brought into the room, he would ask after his old playmate, and he would even cry because they said Tonnerre was gone. Johanna could never quite succeed in breaking him of that petulant habit of crying when he wanted to have his way.

Other pets, however, were given him by friends, and he made them all welcome; white mice, a tame squirrel, a big cat whom he taught to respect the mice, and a couple of canaries. They were quite a family of friends to him, with their separate names and their individual peculiarities, and he liked to tell you about them and their tricks. The canaries were his favourites, 'because of their beautiful song,' he said, and he declared—was it a fancy of his or not?—that he could always know when they sang—

of course without distinguishing a note—by the movement their music occasioned in the air around him. Thus, in the care of his 'menagerie,' as Henkie called it, his heart found opportunities of extending its affections, and Johanna often told him laughingly that she was jealous of his winged and four-footed loves. 'I don't know,' said Elias slowly on one of these occasions. He always spoke slowly, as if looking for his words. 'I should like to love everybody, only that it seems like loving nobody. But I love you best, Johanna, except myself.'

Presently he added:

'I—I love myself very much, Johanna. Do you love yourself better than me?'

Any lie seemed preferable to the truth for a moment, for the woman shrank from the seeming self-complacency of the confession. And then she said angrily aloud: 'He is only he, after all,' and yet she

blushed deeply as she spelled on his neck :

‘No ; I think I love you better, Elias.’

He sat quiet for a moment, and then he said softly : ‘I didn’t know. I thought it was very good of me to be so fond of you. I think I should like to love you better, Johanna, than I love myself. But I love myself very much. And I think I would rather have myself happy than anybody else’s happiness.’

Elias was about twenty, when he thus spoke. He was too foolish not to distinguish better between what is and what we suppose to be.

‘It is no use trying to develop his intellect,’ Dr. Pillenaar had repeatedly said to Johanna: ‘He can’t stand it. And, especially, he can’t stand efforts to increase his stock of knowledge. Working on his memory is useless, and can only do harm. Try what you can achieve with his moral

sense, his affections, his standard of right and wrong, and so on. I am not very hopeful, but any improvement can only come from thence. Instruction is out of the question. I do not say that a certain amount—a moderate amount—of education may not be attainable with patience and tact. I believe you have both, my good woman, at least where this youth is concerned. See what you can do for him. A man may be a man, though he doesn't know the multiplication-table, all the better, perhaps, for never having realized that himself and nine fellow-creatures only make an I and a Nought.'

Johanna undertook her task and worked it out with laborious devotion. In fact, she had begun it long before Dr. Pillenaar mentioned the subject. At Clarens she had been amazed to discover that Elias's whole idea of moral distinctions was based upon 'Mamma likes' and 'Mamma doesn't like'

—a rule good enough in itself, perhaps, but surely only as the outer court to an inner temple. Elias reposed tranquilly upon the consideration that wrong became wrong through your mother's finding it out. Right became wrong, for that matter, if it interfered with the good lady's comfort, and certainly wrong became altogether right, if she happened—through ignorance or carelessness—not to object to it. It was, in its way, a very complicated system, because its single instances all had to be judged apart, without any possible reduction to general rules, but, on the other hand, it had the advantage of offering a superficial, but fully satisfactory solution of each difficulty, immediately it supervened, so that you could always know, for the moment at least, what to do and what not to do. But, away from his stepmother's scoldings, Elias was as a vessel without a rudder. He was anxious to find out Johanna's opinions on various

subjects, and he set himself to do so with laudable earnestness. 'Mamma won't allow me to keep my wet boots on when there's company,' he said, 'but, Johanna, there's no company here.'

Johanna devoted her life to the rousing in his torpid nature of a consciousness of the fundamental principles of right and wrong. 'Elias good,' 'Elias not good'—as with a little child. It was uphill-work, at first, not that she found him unwilling to learn, but the narrow limits of his horizon made it difficult for him to oversee problems which belong to the most intricate the human race must grapple with, while yet he had natural sensitiveness of conscience enough partly to perceive them upon his path. 'If it's bad of me, what makes me want to do it?' he would ask, for instance. And upon Johanna's replying that it was the devil who tempted him, 'Then why didn't God forget to make the devil when He made all the rest?' said the fool.

And the worst of it was that his brain had not elasticity enough to cast off a perplexity which had once got itself wedged fast. He would repeat a question like the above over and over again during many weeks, always forgetting the answer he had received a few hours before. And Johanna would answer with unaltering patience that she did not know, or that nobody knew, or, at last,—when this solution left him longing for somebody who did know—that God did not make the devil, but that the devil made himself.

He had not strength of mind enough to leap beyond so satisfactory an answer, and therefore found contentment in it, until he forgot—and asked again.

But, whatever might become of the theological abstractions, one practical lesson Johanna found easy enough to drive home. The simple duty of doing little kindnesses was one which he understood with eager aptitude ; in fact, there was considerable

danger of his missing the idea of duty in the pleasure which this fulfilment of duty occasioned him. And soon it became the greatest reward for good behaviour that he should be allowed to give some trifle away.

His nurse encouraged him, in his dull life, to seek this diversion as much as possible. And they would go out into the country cottages together, and with his own hand Elias would distribute what he had brought. He made friends in this way among the cottage children. He would speak to them, and some of them would get over their alarm when they saw how gentle and kindly he was. This simple philanthropy of almsgiving, which estimable people will probably think ought not to have been permitted, was an ever increasing source of pleasurable occupation, and it brought him into contact with his fellow-creatures as he would not otherwise have been brought. Then, after a time, it became not only mere alms-giving,

when Elias got to know individual cases. And his serene presence in the cottages was in itself a lesson which only they could overlook who were blinder than he.

For, after the poignant hope and fear of the first months, and the stagnant agony which succeeded them, Elias sank into more cheerful repose. At first they who watched over him dreaded that this tranquillity might deepen into apathy, but the untiring devotion of his faithful nurse drew him slowly out of his lethargic resignation into a taste for the various occupations which have been indicated above. And as the years passed on, and his health grew stronger, some new interest would be added from time to time to the little circle which was already his.

Of games, unfortunately, he could only play the simplest. His head was, of course, not strong enough for chess, or draughts, or even dominoes, in the study of which he might otherwise have whiled away so many

a weary hour. But he could play an occasional game of 'solitaire' in his loneliness, and, extraordinary as it may seem, he had selected the game of 'spillikens' as his especial favourite. The merely mechanical skill was within his comprehension, and the extreme delicacy of his touch enabled him to discern if the piece he was lifting came into contact with another. He learnt through long practice to judge of the position of the set by lightly passing his fingers over the little heap, and, if he failed to notice a movement, Johanna would be near to give a hint. He attained great proficiency through constant repetition, and it was a strange sight to watch this blind creature bending, with contracted brows, over the simple game which would seem to require, as one might think, keenness of eye quite as much as sureness of hand.

Very, very slowly the shadows deepened over his already clouded intellect. With all her love Johanna could not avert them ; with

all her hopefulness she could not ignore their coming. Almost imperceptibly in the enforced seclusion in which he lived, hedged in on every side, the lights of human intelligence went out one by one. He forgot more and more, his little stock of knowledge growing less—he experienced yet greater difficulty in finding his words. He began to speak of himself in the third person, as little children do: ‘Elias wants to,’ ‘Elias will be good.’

And yet—to her who knew him best because she loved him, it seemed as if with the increase of his manhood, he grew gentler, kinder, more affectionate.

And his father knew only this. He knew that he had constantly asked the boy: ‘Are you happy, Elias?’ And at first, there had been no reply possible, and then the lad had sometimes said: ‘I suppose so, Papa,’ and now the man would often answer: ‘Yes.’

And the days were like each other, and the years were like the days, only longer, and when Elias was twenty-five, Hendrik Lossell died.





CHAPTER XII.

VOLDERDOES ZONEN.

HENDRIK Junior was nineteen, and had entered his father's office the year before. Hubert, being more backward than his brother, was to remain a little longer at the School of Commerce. They had worked together originally until Hubert, not having 'passed' on one occasion, had been forced to see Hendrik move into a higher form without him. This separation had naturally caused a change in their pursuits, their companions, their hours and courses of work. They had been compelled to go each his separate way, and from being almost always

together, they had come to consider it natural that the one should not know for hours what the other was doing. 'I wish you would help me with my work, Henk,' said Huib, 'as you used to when we worked together.' 'Oh, I can't bother,' said Henk. 'I've forgotten all that rot since I moved up. It seems years ago since I learnt it.' Good-natured Huib winced.

Dutch boys talk Dutch slang. Their repertoire is small, and lacks the picturesqueness of English school-talk. Still, they are as convinced as their coevals over the water that there is a good deal rotten in the bill of fare prepared for their intellectual nourishment, and the term used above can therefore certainly not be considered misplaced. And schoolboy-talk is untranslatable. To the connoisseur it always seems delightful, salt and bracing and ever fresh, like a breeze from the hills of youth. What a good thing it is that the mammas so seldom hear it! It

only reaches them, as a rule, through the medium of the young ladies' schoolroom, and from the lips of these it tastes like bottled sea-water, and not a bit like bottled breeze. No, a girl should not talk slang. She always knows she is talking it. And therefore in her it becomes affectation, while its very essence is 'unavoidableness.' In the boy's case it comes bubbling from the lips with irresistible simplicity, and you feel that it is the harmonious vehicle of his thoughts. It is keen, supple, gleaming. And it strikes straight. With the young lady whose governess is teaching her how to hand a parcel—pooh ; do you remember that old fable ?—hush ; let us be polite, even to the slang-talkster :

‘ There once was a lion that went out walking in a donkey-skin.’

‘ And everybody noticed how much softer a donkey's skin is by nature than a lion's.’

Fables are wearisome things till you get

to the moral; and then they become provoking.

At least, so I have always found them, but most people whom I have questioned on the subject have told me they considered fables were very instructive, because they give you such a much clearer insight into the faults of your fellow-creatures.

It is unfortunately hardly correct that Dutch schoolboys delight in slang. They have but few idiomatic expressions, and these are often of very unpleasing origin. Alas that they should make up for the deficiency by oaths.

Then, why, it may be asked, this dissertation upon the subject? There was a man once who possessed a coat, but no peg to hang it on. So, having honestly earned his coat, he stole a peg. He thought that the coat would hide the peg. And so it did, but, as it hung loose in the air, the detectives cleverly remarked that the peg must be

behind it. And they took the peg away, and the coat, and the man; and upon the latter the critics sat down—no, I mean the detectives. And so he died.

Hendrik went into his father's office. And he began to talk about 'Change.' They call it the 'Purse' in Holland, as everywhere on the Continent, and Elias had long believed that it was a great bag full of money, hung up somewhere, and that his father and all other people's fathers went down to it every afternoon and took out as much as they wanted. He asked why the ragged children's fathers did not go down to the 'Bourse.' 'Elias,' said Hendrik, 'is an unutterable fool.' The adjective was painfully true.

Hendrik Junior was not a fool. Even the many who did not like him unhesitatingly admitted that he was a smart young man. His father's old clerks beamed upon

him, when he sat down before his office desk, spreading out his spidery little legs on a magenta-coloured sheepskin, and knotting his little black eyebrows, as he struck a quick hand through a thick bundle of papers, with an incisive 'Let's see.' 'Volderdoes Zonen' was not merely a wholesale tea-shop. It was a great house in the best sense of the word, a social institution, and—to a certain extent—what might be called a tribal family. All those who were connected with it and its far-spreading interests, were connected with each other. The mighty head of the firm, looming bald and sacred, in the far distance of his sanctum behind glass doors that opened into the outer office, was Volderdoes Zonen incarnate, but the youngest errand-boy, who stared timidly from the entrance-hall, as he came up with his message, across lines of desks and bended heads, towards a solemn silence where mortals scarce dared tread, felt that he, too, somehow and in

some infinitesimal manner, was 'Volderdoes Zonen,' and rejoiced in the thought. Outside, where he waited, was a perpetual clamour of rail-cars, a babel of voices, the continual thud of heavy cases, the monotonous rush of ropes on the pulley—and men, with grave, preoccupied faces, passed him rapidly, going to and fro through the great doors. Inside was silence, except for the buzz of voices in the so-called 'Strangers' Office'—nothing but the occasional rustle of a leaf, or a fragment of a whispered conversation, as one clerk would step over for a moment to consult with another. Sometimes a handbell would ring with a sharp, electric twang from the chief's table, and a name would be called out—in a clear and imperative key. Then some quiet worker would lay down his pen and pass through the glass division, into the presence of his sovereign. The oldest of them never listened for the name which must follow that electric signal.

without a moment's quiver of expectation. It was the only occasion on which Volderdoes Zonen's clerks laid down their pens unwiped.

And from the yard and the quays beyond it came the boom of the machinery, the rustle of the descending lift, the 'heigh-ho's' to the horses among the clatter of hoofs and the whistle of whips, hour after hour, day after day through the winter rains, when the great stoves were lighted inside, and round by the sweet soft, summer months when all the windows were opened and, amid the scents of tea and machine-oil and lilacs, the twittering of the city-sparrows broke in upon the ceaseless scratching of the pens. There was not one of them from the oldest to the youngest (not the sparrows, rather the pens) but felt 'Volderdoes Zonen' to be eternal, without beginning and without ending, like the world they lived in.

Hendrik Lossell himself, they felt, though

he was an incorporation and a symbol, was not the eternal Idea, any more than William I. or William II. is the Empire. He would go, as he had come, and Hendrik II. would come in his turn, and go also, but the unity of which all the busy workers were component parts was not dependent on any of them for its existence, either the greatest or the least.

Hendrik Lossell, however, was fully conscious that for the time being, at any rate, the sceptre rested in his hand. Not that he allowed it to rest; he swayed it with that kind of impersonal government which is usually described as 'stern' by those who are passively, and 'just' by those who are actively connected with it. Disobedience meant instant dismissal; obedience could not always mean immediate reward. That was unavoidable, and the management of so extensive a business required, you may be certain, a firm hand as well as a quick one.

‘Office hours are too short for good work, as it is,’ Lossell would say to some penitent promising amendment; ‘I can’t pay for bad.’ ‘There’s no room for repentance in business,’ he used to remark. ‘If you want to repent, I must leave you free to do so at home.’ Whoever might be head of his household, there was no doubt who was master in the office. Perhaps he found some sweet compensation in the thought. Who shall tell?

And when he himself was found out in some omission, or some positive error? Well, that would occur at times, of course; and the moment was an awful one. It happened upon one occasion that a mistake had been made which involved a considerable loss. The confidential clerk who had to broach the matter to his master trembled in his shoes, not for himself, for the fault was Lossell’s. The clerk had been in the office more than forty years; he had served old Elias long before anyone had thought of

the present head of the firm. He spoke calmly, despite his tremor, politely, positively. The chief reddened, looked up with an uncomfortable glance, looked down at the papers before him. 'Yes,' he said, 'Mr. Hopman, there has been an altogether inexcusable mistake. I am very much vexed, very much displeased, that such a mistake should have occurred, and I must bear the consequences.'

The old clerk understood. It was Volderdoes Zonen scolding Hendrik Lossell.

But Volderdoes Zonen did not send Hendrik Lossell away.

The walls of the private room were hung with the firm's historic mementoes ; diplomas of honour, an appointment to the Jury of a Great Exhibition, a framed and glazed letter from a European sovereign long since dead. They were spread out there as the captured banners adorn the chapel of a conqueror. And high above the monumental mantel-

piece, with its solemn clock, sat enthroned the life-sized portrait of a Chinese Grandee, a splendour of flowered silk under a pair of little twinkling slits of celestial Cheatery, a Li-Foo-Something, who had earned his highest button by robbing his Imperial Master in company with old Elias's father.

This heathen Chineese was the tutelary deity of the house. He pervaded it, as such a patron spirit should, for old Elias had turned his father's friend into a trademark—alas, the illustrious dead!—and everything belonging to the business, even the charwoman's dusters, that came out of their cupboard on Saturday afternoon, bore the image of the tea-honoured Mandarin. He was an actual Presence; they believed in him down at 'Volderdoes Zonen's,' and spoke of him and to him, as if he really were responsible for the fortunes of the firm. The warehousemen had a superstition among them, laughed at, yet not altogether despised,

that the great cases could not come to grief as long as the Chinaman-label upon them remained intact. And when old Volderdoes celebrated his silver-jubilee as head of the business, the whole of the staff clubbed together, big and little, every member of the vast family, the errand-boys subscribing five cents, and presented him with a silver dessert-service, in which silver mandarins sat under silver palm-trees, bearing crystal dishes. There were any number of silver mandarins, fit type of the spoil which the astute Li had divided between himself and his Christian confederate. Judith Lossell spread them over her table on all state occasions, for she was a merchant's daughter and had a merchant's daughter's pride.

"Fiddlesticks!" said Hendrik Junior. He believed in silver, and in Chinamen, but he did not believe in tutelary deities, nor, in fact, in any deity, whether adverse or otherwise. He did not even believe overmuch in

‘Volderdoes Zonen.’ At home he spoke of it as ‘the shop,’ but not when any stranger was by. It was an unavoidable formality for making money to him, nothing more. Money was the one thing worth having, on this beastly planet. If you could have got it without any trouble, so much the better, but, as you could not, well, ‘Volderdoes Zonen’ came handy. He considered himself especially praiseworthy for looking at matters in this light. He knew men enough who wanted money but were too lazy to work for it. He did not realize how great his wish for money was.

Well, but he worked hard for it. And when the day’s work was over, he would go and spend his evening quietly at the opera, especially if there was a ballet, or at one of the little theatres where you laugh without knowing why. And if he wanted other pleasures, he took them without troubling anybody about them, and there was never

any scandal or unpleasantness in connection with young Hendrik Lossell's name. He was altogether a most estimable young man. There were many such in Koopstad.

He quite forgot in a month or two that poor Hubert, still at school, was his twin-brother. He thought of him, and soon spoke of him, as the younger son. And so, indeed, he was, though only by several minutes. He grew younger daily, however, in the new-fledged merchant's eye.

'That's your brother, ain't it, Lossell?' said a fresh chum, also a merchant-princelet, when they met Hubert coming along the street with his books under his arm. 'Yes,' said Hendrik, with a good-humoured smile, 'c'est mon cadet, you know. He goes to school.'

Elias also knew something, in his vague way, of the greatness of Volderdoes Zonen. He had grown up under the shadow of the

house, and as a child, before his troubles came upon him, he had played in the warehouses and watched the men at their work. The memory had remained with him, and would abide in his heart for ever, as those experiences of our earlier years become our companions through life. He did not, certainly, know much of the intricacies of commerce; but he did know, for his father had repeated it to him almost daily for many years, that 'Volderdoes Zonen' was a thing to be honoured and revered, as the source of all good to himself and to all his relations. It was as if the merchant had set himself to inspire his eldest son with a cult of the historic name, he who left all impressions of religion or morality to a servant. Probably he had good reasons for his conduct, and could have told you why such strange conversations as the following were so common between him and the son who had attained to manhood, and who would live through his

whole existence, without ever coming into contact with that busy world in which the merchant dwelt.

‘Elias, what is your father? Tell me, do you remember?’

‘Head of the house of “Volderdoes Zonen,” Papa. The *great* house of “Volderdoes Zonen,” I mean.’

‘And what was your grandfather?’

‘He was the same, Papa.’

‘And what would you like to be best of all, if you could work?’

‘I don’t know, Papa. I forget.’

‘Yes, you do’—impatiently. ‘Think.’

A silence. Then suddenly: ‘I should like to be a doctor, Papa, and make all the sick people well.’

‘No, no. You would like better still to be what your father and grandfather have been, would you not?’

‘Henk may be that, Papa.’

‘Very well; so he may, now you can’t.’

But you ought to have been it. And it is the grandest thing in the world. But now you will like Hendrik to be it, when I am dead; will you not? What would you do, Elias, if people came and told you, after my death, that you mustn't allow Hendrik to take my place?

'I would kill them, Papa.' The strong man clenched his fists, and involuntarily spread out his massive chest.

'No, no, that is not necessary. But you would tell them that Hendrik must take it; would you not?'

'Yes, Papa, but'—an expression of extreme anxiety—'you are not going to go away, are you?'

'No; I hope not. But, listen, Elias, what would become of you, if Volderdoes Zonen ceased to exist?'

'I should die of hunger,' answered Elias rapidly, and by rote. 'Or else people would come and take me away, and lock me up in

an asylum, and everything would be very miserable and poor.'

'That is true. You will never forget it.'

'No, Papa.'

And the merchant went his way.

It was like a catechism.

'Johanna,' said Elias presently, 'why are some people poor and some people rich?'

'Because it's good for them,' replied Johanna, who was an optimist, or she could not have lived with the fool.

'And am I rich?' asked Elias.

'Yes. Or at least your father is.'

'And are you poor?'

'Yes.'

'It seems to be very much the same thing,' declared Elias, after a period of slow thought.

'I suppose, the devil made the poor people first, and then God made the rich people to help them, and so He put it all right again?'

Johanna did not answer him.

‘I am glad God gave us “Volderdoes Zonen” to look after us,’ he went on. ‘It was very good of Him. And I shall thank Him for it every day.’

And he did.

It was a few days after the conversation recorded above, the last of many, that Hendrik Lossell’s tenure of office as head of ‘Volderdoes Zonen’ came to an end.

‘I have got a pain in the left side,’ he said to his wife at breakfast one morning. ‘Do you know, I think it must be something the matter with my heart. I have felt it once or twice before, of late.’

‘Oh, nonsense!’ replied Judith carelessly. ‘How fussy you men always are! It’s just nothing but a little wind. I know the feeling quite well. I’ve had it, myself.’

He did not continue the subject, but presently got up to go to the office, as usual.

Mevrouw Lossell followed him to the door.

'Don't forget to look in at Ramaker's,' she said, 'and tell them to be quite sure to have the fresh turbot for Tuesday. It's a bad day for fish. I wish we could have had our dinner-party on another day.'

'I can't help it, Judith,' he replied, a little wearily, 'as I told you before. I must attend the Town Council on Wednesday, and the meeting of the Chamber of Commerce on Thursday, and *you* won't have it on a Friday or a Saturday; so there you are.'

'Ah, well!' she said, with an injured air. 'In any case, don't forget.'

'I shan't forget,' he replied, and was gone.

He drove out to Elias first this morning, as he noticed that he had plenty of time. He had made it a rule, from which he only deviated under stress of circumstances, to

give his eldest son at least a few minutes every day, but he usually went to him in the afternoon.

Elias was surprised and delighted to receive his father at so early an hour. This visit was a continual treat to him, the great event of his uneventful day. For Hendrik Lossell had acquired much facility in Johanna's method of conversing with the deaf man—Elias's method, as she proudly called it, for had he not been its inventor?—and in his own peculiar way the father was kind to his son, kind almost against his will one would feel inclined to say. It was against his will that he often wished Elias dead; it was against his will that he often treated him with generosity and affection. This unfortunate son was to him not so much an unpleasing personage as an adverse circumstance. But he did his best—he had always done his best—to treat him well, none the less.

‘Papa,’ said Elias this morning, ‘Elias tired. Elias often so tired. And forget words. Elias not talk much.’

‘It is one of his bad days,’ interposed Johanna, who had been bustling about the room, getting things ready for her charge. ‘He has been complaining of headache all the morning. When he has one of these bad headaches, he is very dull and stupid. I think they get rarer, as time goes on, but—do you know, sir?—I think they get worse.’

The father went up to his son and stood looking at him intently for some moments. Presently he groaned, audibly. And then, turning suddenly away, as if to hide his confusion, he said to the woman :

‘He is a beautiful man.’

‘Indeed, that he is, Mynheer,’ assented Johanna energetically. A vision rose up before her of Henkie and Hubbie, yellow-faced, sharp-featured, groomed and oiled

and smartened up, as she turned towards the silent, statuesque figure, motionless in its customary arm-chair, and stood gazing lovingly upon that noble Olympian head, with its glory of golden curls and the line of patient suffering over the closed and tranquil eyes.

‘ Good-bye, Elias,’ spelled the father.

‘ Good-bye, Papa.’

‘ You love me, after all—don’t you?—in spite of all?’

‘ Of course I love you, Papa.’

Hendrik Lossell turned to go. The woman passed out and opened the hall-door for him.

‘ You yourself look far from well, sir,’ she said. ‘ Hadn’t you better see a doctor too, once in a way?’

‘ Oh, I’m all right, thank you, Johanna,’ he answered, as he got into his brougham.

‘ If the boy becomes completely idiotic,’ he muttered as the carriage bore him away,

‘he may as well become it without loss of time. It would be the best thing that could happen, I suppose, on the whole.’

He almost invariably alluded to this full-grown son as ‘the boy.’ What more was he? Nay, in fact he was barely that. And yet he was not a child, as other children are.

The merchant’s face twitched once or twice, as if with sudden pain, and he gave a sigh of relief when the coachman drew up at last in front of the warehouse. He thought to himself with a half-smile, as he let himself slowly out and crossed the busy threshold, that it was now more than twenty-five years since he had entered the office at that hour as a partner in the concern. Day after day, month after month—but for an occasional brief summer holiday at some foreign watering-place—had he done what he was doing now. The same twist through the same side-door and down the same

passage. The same 'Good-day's' among yesterday's unchanged surroundings. He hung up his coat and hat on their accustomed peg. And then, in turning to take his place before his desk, he cast the same invariable glance towards the clock. And the clock marked the same invariable hour.

He sat down and drew the day's bundle of business towards him. Hendrik would not be in for an hour or so. 'No use trying to make young folks give up old habits,' he said to himself.

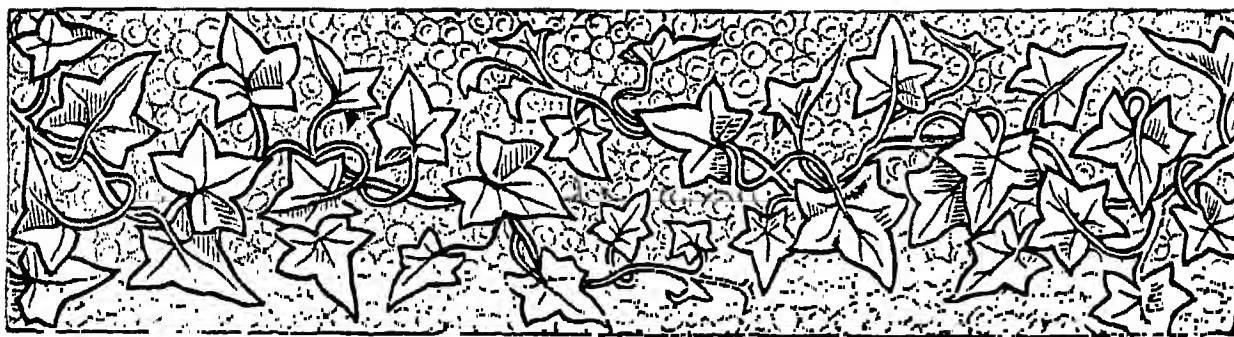
And then he settled down to the day's work.

A packer had been turned off for carelessness, and had appealed from his immediate superior to Cæsar. Hendrik Lossell went into the matter as was his wont. He found that the man had indeed been to blame, though in no serious degree, but he maintained the dismissal, in spite of prayers and entreaties.

‘Not time enough for good work,’ he repeated, ‘still less for bad.’ And then he returned to his own.

And when Hendrik Junior came in about half an hour later, he found that our common Master, Death, had touched the chief of the great house of ‘Volderdoes Zonen,’ and dismissed him from his post.





CHAPTER XIII.

THE HEAD OF THE FIRM.

HENDRIK LOSSELL, Hendrik Junior no longer, stepped towards the glass doors and drew them to. Then with one rapid jerk of the wrist he swept the broad 'portière,' which hung handy, across that wide surface of glass. From time to time the chief of the house would thus close out the office, when he wanted to be alone. And then the son went back to his father's prostrate figure, thrown forward across the desk. He did not for one moment doubt that this was death. He saw the seal set plainly upon the rigid face. 'Death,' he said in an undertone, and his little

figure trembled from head to foot with a couple of quick, nervous thrills. And then he drew, with unsteady hand, the keys of the great safe from his father's trousers pocket, where he knew they were always kept. He had to unfasten a button of the pocket to get at them, and for a moment he shrank back in disgust. 'Allons,' he said, aloud. And then he struck a quick blow on his father's bell, and, holding the curtained door ajar for one moment, he called out the name of the head clerk, his father's right hand.

'Meneer Trols.'

He started at the loudness of his own voice in that chamber of death.

The person thus summoned came hurrying up. He passed beyond the curtain, and appeared in the sanctum, his face lighted by a look of expectation he was striving to restrain. Hendrik was standing by the table, where lay his father's corpse.

'Mynheer Trols,' he began nervously,

‘something terrible has happened. Something very terrible indeed.’

‘Good God, sir, the master!’ cried the clerk, running round to the figure in the chair.

‘Do not interrupt me,’ fired up Hendrik angrily. ‘Yes, something has happened to my father——’

‘He is dead!’ cried the clerk, unheeding. He had lifted the fallen head, and was striving to retain it in his arms.

‘Hush, you fool!’ burst out Hendrik fiercely. ‘Do you want the whole office to hear you? Don’t you see it’s far worse for me than for you, and I don’t go on like that. It’s my father. Be a man. D—— me, what a fool you are!’

For the clerk was striving in vain to control the workings of his face. The old fellow was crying.

‘Go back into the office, as soon as you’re fit to,’ said Hendrik contemptuously, ‘and

say that Mynheer has been taken ill, and that I have gone home with him. But first tell one of the men to run for a cab, and then you and I will lift in—him. I don't want it to be known he died in the office. Do you understand? It will be given out that he died at home.'

'Yes,' said Trols, speaking as a man in a maze. But why put it so? If——'

'You understand me, Mynheer Trols,' interrupted Hendrik. 'Please to order the cab.'

When the clerk returned from this mission, he found young Lossell sitting at his own desk, with his back turned to—that thing—on the table.

'I will tell you, Mynheer Trols,' said Hendrik, 'why I wish to return home with— with my father. There is no reason why the day's business should be disturbed. In fact, it can't be, as you know. Not to-day, of all days. The *Jeannette* sails this

evening, and she must take our cargo with her. It is a matter of forty thousand florins. I can't shut up the office to-day.'

'But, sir,' stammered the head clerk, 'I believe that Mynheer had just spoken of countermanding the consignment. He had heard bad accounts of the firm in Copenhagen. And even if it were not so, would it not be better, in the face of so appalling a catastrophe——'

'Not a word more,' interrupted Hendrik haughtily. 'Remember, if you please, Mynheer Trols, that I am the head of "Volderdoes Zonen" now.'

'What will become of us?' said Trols to himself, as he went back to his desk, after having aided his young master and obeyed all his commands. 'A boy of nineteen! He can't be the chief, whatever he may say. He isn't even of age, nor will he be for the next four years. I wonder whether I am

right in executing this order. Well, I can't help it. I suppose I must. But common decency would have shut up the place for the day.'

And so young Hendrik inaugurated his reign. It may be a satisfaction to the reader who likes to know everything to be told that the Copenhagen house failed in the course of a month or two, so that the little job above mentioned cost Volderdoes Zonen the sum of thirty seven thousand four hundred florins and ninety-three cents.

'And now, mother,' said Hendrik, 'let us see how matters stand. You may as well call in Huib, and we can all talk it over together.'

They were sitting lugubriously facing each other by the dying dining-room fire. The remnants of dinner—an untouched dessert—stood on the table, under the dim light of a lamp which left three-quarters of the room

in mysterious gloom. The meal had been a silent one, and Hubert had escaped from it to his own room as soon as possible. Hubert was frightened and saddened by his father's sudden death. His was a gentle nature ; and he attached himself to his surroundings.

Hendrik got up, as his mother left the room, and stationed himself in front of the fireplace. He shuddered slightly as he stared into the darkness of the dreary distance.

Over the whole house hung that incomprehensible atmosphere of death, which lights up the monotony of existence with a sudden glare of false electric light, bringing out in lines of unexpected nakedness the littleness of daily wants and duties and throwing into full relief the reality of our turbulent consciousness against the great still shadow of the beyond.

'I am alive,' said Hendrik to himself, not

in so many words, but in a thought he was unconscious of thinking. He had been feeling it thus to himself all day. He rang the bell.

‘Is there a fire in my mother’s room?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said the servant; they had forgotten to light it. The servants sat huddled together in the kitchen, describing to each other all the corpses they had ever seen, with comments upon their greater or lesser beauty and upon the ravages caused by various diseases. The cook had occasioned a little unpleasant feeling by the statement that she had owned an aunt the cost of whose funeral had amounted to over a hundred florins. To this poetic license the others had taken exception, even when the items, as described, had been carefully totted up by the butler, and their voices had risen for a moment in indignant discussion, only to be suddenly hushed into whispers of

mutual disparagement, when somebody recalled the fact that their master was lying 'barely cold' upstairs.

The pretty housemaid rubbed her warm arm approvingly with one rough little hand. And the butler said sententiously that it was a good thing the dead had to leave their money behind them, and he dared say that Mevrouw would keep up everything just as it was. They all looked at each other. That was an interesting subject, and it caused them to forget the cook's ostentatious relative. They were discussing probabilities when the dining-room bell rang.

'Bring a couple more lamps, then; we shall stay here,' said Hendrik to the butler. 'Commanding like a king,' remarked the latter gentleman on his way downstairs. It was true that the nineteen-year-old son of the house had at once assumed an air of proprietorship. He felt that he was become

the head of the family as well as of the firm. And without noticing the change himself, he had allowed his voice and manner to take a shade of authority in consequence.

Yesterday, you see—whatever he might think he merited—he knew that he was of very little importance to anyone but himself, while to-day—why, to-day he was almost as important as his father had been yesterday—had been this morning. His father! who had always seemed to him the ideal of a social magnate, whose will governed as many inferior wills as that of the colonel of a regiment, and with far more unlimited power.

He was a minor, of course, but he had not the slightest doubt that he would immediately obtain letters of dispensation. Who else could manage the business but he? He was quite confident that he could manage the business. That was the great weakness in his strength, his overweening self-assur-

ance, and it was the chief cause of the many misfortunes which befell him in his after-life.

When his mother came back with her other son, she found the lamps distributed over the room as was customary on the occasion of a dinner-party. The festive impression thus effected struck unpleasantly on her freshly-widowed heart. It called up painful recollections of her last conversation with her husband that morning, and of the invitations for next Tuesday which had already been sent round.

‘Why all these lights?’ she asked.

‘I hate a half-light,’ answered Hendrik abruptly. ‘What do you care, mother? There’ll be money enough to pay for a little extra lamp-oil, I should think.’

‘Papa wouldn’t understand, if he came in,’ interposed Hubert. ‘The room never looks like that.’

Hendrik glanced scornfully at his twin-

brother. 'I thought you knew our father is dead,' he said. 'It's no use speculating on what he would do if he wasn't.'

'I know he is dead,' replied Hubert quickly. 'But he is barely dead, Henk.' And again the tears gathered in his eyes.

Hendrik vouchsafed no answer. He drew a chair forward for his mother, and then said abruptly: 'Mother, here are father's keys.' And he threw them down on the white tablecloth. In his nervousness he threw them more violently than he had intended. They struck against a wine-glass, and broke it.

'Oh, Hendrik!' expostulated his mother, 'one of your grandfather's set!'

'Not *my* grandfather's,' replied Hendrik. 'That's where the difference comes in. These social courtesies are all very pretty, but when it comes to legal documents you soon find out that your stepbrother's grand-

father never was yours. We shall have to distinguish henceforth between Elias and ourselves.'

'Not as regards these matters,' said his mother. She did not say what matters, but they understood each other perfectly.

'In these matters and in all others. And therefore the sooner we know exactly how we stand, the better. I shall go down to the office to-morrow as usual, and Trols must sign till I can get the proper authorization. It's a good thing he is empowered to sign for the firm.'

'Couldn't you stay at home till after the funeral?' queried his mother.

'Yes, if they shut up the "Exchange" till then,' sneered the new head of the house. 'Now, mother, there are the keys, as I said, and the best thing we can do is to look over my father's papers. It's no use waiting till you feel inclined, for you won't feel any inclineder to-morrow than to-day.'

‘ I did not say I did not feel inclined,’ said Judith.

‘ Hubert, you take one lamp, and I’ll take another,’ Hendrik continued, suiting the action to the word. And so they passed together, the three of them, into the dead man’s room.

The dead man’s room does not die with him. On the contrary, it becomes far more vividly, far more painfully alive than it was before his death. It seems to be breathing, almost audibly, and as you stand there, lamp in hand, amid the twilight, all its thousand and one little trifling objects seem to be opening their new-found eyes and staring gloomily at you. And when your glance falls unexpectedly on the dead man’s hat and gloves, you realize, as you never realized before, that he is dead.

Judith Lossell took up a woollen comforter, which she had only recently knitted for her husband. She had noticed that morning

that he had neglected to put it on, and she had felt a twinge of displeasure at the thought of his holding her gift in such light esteem. Now, as she took it meditatively in her hands, a couple of tears dropped slowly on the wrap.

‘Lift up your lamp, so I can see, Huib,’ said Hendrik.

He had set down his own and was trying the keys on his father’s private ‘Chatwood.’

The safe contained two compartments, the one, with a second door, being reserved for stock, while in the other lay all important documents, not actually convertible into ready money. It was these that Hendrik drew out, leaving the inner division untouched.

‘We can’t stop here,’ he said, ‘it’s too cold. Mother, would you mind carrying my lamp?’

‘Oh no, not here,’ said Hubert, in a whisper.

They went back to the dining-room.

‘Lock the door, Hubert,’ said Hendrik, and he pushed away the dessert things to make a clear space for the bundle he had brought with him. His mother came to the rescue of her crockery, as Hendrik flung down the papers with a thud in a stream over the white table-cloth. And then they gathered around, and watched, the while he sorted them. Presently a hungry flash passed through his eyes. It was gone in an instant. ‘This is it,’ he said, as he laid down the paper he had just taken up.

It was the will.

He began reading it rapidly, the others waiting impatiently meanwhile. Divested of its legal preamble it was very short indeed.

‘My eldest son Elias being otherwise provided for,’ said the testator, ‘I bequeath to him only that legal portion of which I could not deprive him if I would, while I appoint my twin-sons, his half-brothers, Hendrik and

Hubert, heirs of all other property of which I die possessed.'

In Holland a parent cannot entirely disinherit his or her child, but must leave it a fraction of the inheritance.

Hendrik laid down the document. 'That was the best arrangement father could make,' he said with a complacent smile. 'What's the use of leaving money to a half-witted creature like Elias, who already has his mother's money probably, besides? You and I must be Volderdoes Zonen, henceforth, Huib.'

'But you haven't found out about Elias's money yet,' said Hubert quietly.

'Oh, that's his mother's fortune, of course, which has been invested in Government securities during his minority. The law arranges all that, Hubert.'

'I know,' said Hubert, without any sign of impatience.

'Wait till you see,' interposed Judith.

She recalled several dark threats of her husband's, and her heart was not at rest.

'Find Papa's marriage-settlement,' suggested Hubert. He often thought, while Hendrik was busy.

'Here is yours, mother,' said Hendrik, fumbling among the papers.

'I know,' answered Judith angrily. 'It's the other woman's you want.'

They found it. It was a lengthy document, a marriage-settlement in *propria forma*. It settled the sum of one hundred thousand florins on Hendrik Lossell's first wife, and it tied down all the money she would ever possess to herself and her heirs for ever. The money was tied down as tight as family pride can tie.

'Of course,' said Hendrik, 'and quite right too. One hundred thousand florins at her marriage. The only question which now remains to be answered is this: What did

old Elias Volderdoes's death add on to that original sum.'

'No trifle probably,' remarked Judith.

'We shall hardly find an answer to that here,' said Hendrik, pushing the various documents apart with his hand.

But they did. For they found a copy of old Elias's will. By-the-bye, all these papers were copies. Dutch law recognises no wills except such as are deposited in the hands of the attorneys, who are Government officials.

And these were the contents of old Elias's will.

The old gentleman disinherited his daughter, thereby setting the example which that daughter's husband afterwards followed with regard to their child. He decreed that the large sum of which he could not deprive her was to be taken from the money which he had invested in the funds, and this sum, according to the marriage-settlements, would pass to her children at her death.

And then he came to the capital which was invested in the business. This capital had been divided, shortly before the old man's death, into one hundred shares of ten thousand florins each. Of these shares five only had been allotted to Hendrik Lossell, while the remaining ninety-five had remained the property of Elias Volderdoes, the head of the firm.

These ninety-five shares the old gentleman now left to his grandchild and godson Elias, with the express stipulation that they were forthwith to be registered in his name. And furthermore it was expressly directed that, if the boy's mother were to die while he was under age, all profits resulting from these shares were yearly to be invested to the said boy's advantage, after deduction of fifteen per cent. by the father. The money was to remain thus tied up, the testator went on to say, as long as the child was under guardianship or curatorship of any kind, and altera-

tions could only be made, when he was able to make them of his own free will.

Such, in brief, were the contents of this singular document, when divested of all technicalities and superfluities. The testator had known, when he made these restrictions, that his daughter, already ailing and near death, would have no other offspring than Elias. He had centred all his hope on this his only male descendant. For his son-in-law, the penniless robber of his daughter's heart, he had never felt any very great affection, but other near relations he had none, and, if Elias died, well, then there would be nothing left worth caring for, and Elias's father might as well have the money as anyone else.

But the old man did not believe that Elias would die. He had his little private superstitions, and he believed in the future of Volderdoes Zonen with Elias at their head.

The result, then, of old Volderdoes's will,

in connection with the previous marriage-contract, was this, that every penny of the vast Volderdoes property was settled on Elias Lossell, and that Elias's father had only enjoyed the interest on his wife's legal portion and the fifteen per cent. on Elias's dividends during the years between Margaretha's death and Elias's twentieth birthday. After that birthday even this source of revenue had failed, as all moneys derived from the minor's property must thenceforth be allowed to accumulate, according to the requirements of Dutch law.

This, however, was not the worst. The worst was undoubtedly that the capital of the firm had been so securely tied down for Elias that there was no getting it loose, unless he himself consented to unfasten it. Any attempt to fictitiously increase that capital — an expedient of very doubtful efficacy — was rendered impossible by the terms of the original agreement.

I do not know whether I have given the exact stipulations, as they ought to have been stated, for, of course, I have never seen the original documents, which are at the notary's, nor the authenticated copies, which are in the hands of the Lossell family, but I believe that all I have repeated here is substantially accurate, and no doubt it will be found sufficient for the requirements of this story of Elias's fortunes.

Young Hendrik sat reading the transcript of Elias's grandfather's will with increasing rapidity and heightening colour. When he came to the term 'guardianship or curatorship,' a subdued exclamation broke from him, which need not here be repeated. He threw the paper across to his mother.

'Every penny is Elias's!' he burst out wildly. 'Great Heaven, that blind idiot is the head of the firm!'



CHAPTER XIV.

NO THOROUGHFARE, AND THE WAY OUT.

‘POOR Elias!’ said Hubert.

Perhaps he had never realized so much as at that moment what an immense injury he had unwittingly done his stepbrother.

And yet he often remembered. It would not be correct to say that he always did so, nor that the recollection saddened his entire life. But it sobered it, casting a shadow at times over its most brilliant sunshine. It was, if you can pardon the simile, like a hollow tooth in his heart, and when he bit on it, he pulled a face. He hardly liked to be thrown much in company with

Elias. For Elias reminded him of the tooth.

‘Poor you!’ retorted Hendrik. ‘Pity yourself and me, if you want to waste pity on anyone. Or shall we still speak of “dear Grandpapa,” when we remember the old gentleman up there?’ He jerked his head in the direction of the great portrait of Elias Volderdoes, which smiled down from the wall with its air of sly pomposity.

There came a knock at the dining-room door.

‘Who’s there?’ cried Hendrik impatiently, sweeping his arm over the scattered papers. ‘Go and be hanged! You can’t come in.’

Hubert went to the door. It was the man-servant, come to clear away.

Hendrik passed out to him. ‘The notary must be sent for at once,’ he said. ‘And Mynheer Alers, also. You know, my friend, he lawyer. He had better come after the

notary is gone. Ask him to step round in half an hour, Mulder.'

He went back to the others.

'And yet, I suppose it is only fair,' said Hubert. 'The firm was originally Volderdoes, and Elias is the only one of us who has any Volderdoes blood in his veins.'

'You are a child, Hubert,' cried his brother, 'and a stupid one. It is not fair. Everyone had a right to expect that, after a quarter of a century of such unceasing work, my father would have bought out any share his first wife had in the business. And so he would have, over and over again, but for this blackguardly clause. He has been working all the time, like a horse, merely to heap up hundreds of thousands of florins for an idiot to whom they are not of the slightest use. I can't imagine what made him keep at it so hard, under the circumstances, unless it was because he couldn't do things otherwise than well. He

was a splendid man of business, was my father. I wish you and I may be like him.'

It was his tribute of esteem to his dead father's memory. And, coming from a young gentleman of his wisdom and self-respect, it was not a little thing.

'After all,' he added presently, 'Papa must have left a lot of money behind him. I dare say there will be no difficulty there. But what is to become of Volderdoes Zonen Providence alone can tell.'

His voice faltered with sincere emotion over the final words.

Yet another disappointment awaited Judith Lossell and her sons. It could not be long before they made the discovery that the Town Councillor had not left a large fortune behind him. And, truly, young Hendrik was deserving of pity, as he fell from one disclosure to another. Soon the whole truth

lay bare before him, and he must face it as best he could.

The very fact of his having been bound down to what he must consider perpetual poverty had driven the merchant into repeated speculation as the one means of achieving a fortune. During the short period of his marriage his income had been very large, and even after his wife's death, up to Elias's twentieth year, it had remained considerable, although his share of the great profits of the firm had then become restricted to the dividends on his own five shares and the fifteen per cent. allotted him on his son's large revenue. With the money he had been enabled to lay on one side he had speculated on the Stock Exchange—'for my children's sake,' he told himself, but not with the success so worthy an object merited. Of late, especially, when his income had so much decreased, his attempts to make good the deficit had proved singularly unfortunate,

and when he died, stricken down suddenly, and still in the prime of life, he left liabilities which far exceeded the value of his personal estate. The great firm of Volderdoes Zonen was as wealthy and prosperous as ever, but its head was practically insolvent.

The merchant, it must be said to his honour, had been scrupulously upright in the administration of his son's fortune. How easy it would have been for him to slur over accounts, nay, actually to ignore them. But, once having bound himself down to this contract by which he accepted the position of acting partner on five shares and fifteen per cent. of all remaining net profits, with his son as sleeping partner and owner of the whole business, he had drawn up his annual accounts as if a board of directors were waiting to audit them. While practically poor himself, he had heaped up his son's great fortune with consistent accuracy. It lay there, gradually swelling to a total such as is

rarely met with in Holland ; it lay useless, and, as long as Elias lived, there it must lie. Hendrik Lossell's commercial integrity accepted the terrible fact as inevitable. It might cause him to wish at times for the death of the hopeless owner, but he had never taken any steps by which his father-in-law's wishes might be set aside.

And yet, when his son came of age, he could easily have attempted some adjustment of his difficulties. He had shrunk from doing so. Perhaps he had remained for some time hesitating and uncertain, and on that very account had delayed the appointment of a curator. Perhaps he had preferred to leave the whole matter to his heirs, presuming that they would be less scrupulous than he.

However this might be, he had lived up to his standard of honour ; and, when he was suddenly struck down, the enormous fortune of Elias was found intact in the

hands of the family notary, in so far as it was not already secured in Dutch consols or in the shares of the firm. He had brought it to the above-mentioned functionary a few days before his death. It was as if he no longer trusted himself, after all these faithful years, to have it lying ready for immediate use. For, indeed, he might easily have used it, if only as security.

When young Hendrik, with white face and smarting eyes, walked into his father's deserted room, and drew forth the second key, and opened the inner division of the safe, he found it empty.

He went up to his mother's bedroom and knocked at the door.

'You can't come in, Hendrik.'

'But I must, mother.'

'You can't. I have the dressmaker with me.'

'Send her away, somewhere, anywhere.'

I must come in'—this in French, which the dressmaker understood perfectly. 'Tell her to go downstairs and make dresses for the servants. All the servants must go into mourning. I should think so. *Il y a de quoi.*'

'*Je ne travaille pas pour la domesticité, Madame,*' said the dressmaker inside, indignantly, wishing to show that she also could speak the language of fashion and fashions, as well as young gentlemen who dealt in tea.

'I know, I know, my good creature,' replied Judith wearily. 'It's only that he wants to come in. You might as well take that bodice into the next room and alter the tucker. He will only be a minute, I dare say.'

'I could do it better at home,' said the dressmaker peevishly.

'I can't help it,' replied the mistress of the house. 'You see he says he wants to come in. And I suppose he must.' All her

strength seemed to have gone out of her. She was rapidly learning to 'knuckle under' to her son.

At this juncture Hendrik rattled the door lock. He was getting tired of waiting.

'Renvoyez-la,' he cried.

The dressmaker came out, casting annihilating glances at the young tyrant. They did not annihilate him, however, because he did not see them. He rushed past her, at a bound, and into his mother's presence.

'Mother!' he cried. 'This is no time for fooling. Borlett will be here in ten minutes, and I must know what to say to him. My father's left nothing but debts. And who's to pay them? The only thing we can do is to repudiate the inheritance at once.'

Judith Lossell turned very pale. All the pride of this wife and daughter of merchants rose up in terrified protest. Such disgrace was impossible. Who could lift up his head again after it?

‘Refuse to pay the debts!’ she stammered.
‘Hendrik, what can you be thinking of?
Whatever happens, we could never sink as
low as that.’

‘We shall have to,’ said Hendrik sullenly.

The poor woman turned from one falling
pillar and clutched feebly at another.

‘Hubert would never allow it,’ she said.

‘Hubert! Hubert!’ cried Hendrik in a
towering rage. ‘And who is Hubert, and
what is Hubert, pray, to allow or disallow?
Will he make money for us out of pebbles,
with his sentimental airs and superior refine-
ment? I can cry enough, if you like, and if
you think crying will do any good. Hubert,
indeed! As if Hubert had an inkling of an
idea, what this ignominy means to me.’ He
checked himself. His voice sank. He
looked quite old and skinny and careworn,
this boy of nineteen.

‘I only meant that it cannot be,’ protested
Judith faintly. ‘It is too terrible.’

‘Look here, mother,’ said Hendrik fiercely, ‘it is terrible, and it is absurd at the same time. But for us it is not funny, only hideous. Yet it is ludicrous, none the less, with the business one of the finest in Holland. It means giving over our family secrets to be the laughing-stock of every club or exchange in the country. But it can’t be helped. At least, I see no way to avoid it, and I’ve been thinking over the matter till I believe my hair is turning gray. There’s some twenty thousand florins still in various securities, and there’s the fifty thousand of the firm, that’s seventy. And there’s a hundred thousand owing to the brokers after this fresh fall in North American Railways, which ought to be paid in forty-eight hours. The best thing is for me just simply to go and tell them that there will be an inventory, and that they must get what they can out of the property. The house, it appears, is Elias’s. I

dare say they'll be civil to me when I explain.'

He choked over the words, but set his face hard.

'You see, you must,' he went on. 'We're minors. You're guardian. They'll come and ask you to pay. And you'—another gulp — 'can't. What'll you say, then, mother?'

He looked at her for a moment, sitting there in her half-finished widow's dress. Then he fixed his eyes on the floor. And then he lifted them again to her face. She did not speak. What should she say?

And then suddenly he threw his arms round her neck and burst into tears. He was only nineteen. This was very different from being lord of 'Volderdoes Zonen,' or even only a merchant-princelet and heir apparent. He was utterly broken down and ashamed.

'And Elias's millions!' he said fiercely.

after a moment, between his sobs. His voice grew hideous with hate.

‘Yes, he could save us,’ answered his mother eagerly, ‘and why not, Henk? I cannot understand it. He is of age. He is not under anyone’s control now. Can’t he do as he likes with his money?’

‘I suppose so,’ faltered Hendrik.

‘Then why can he not spend it as we advise him to?’

Hendrik hesitated. A gleam of hope, and more than hope, played about his cunning little face.

‘It all depends,’ he said slowly, ‘whether Elias is crazy or not.’

And then a long silence fell upon them.





CHAPTER XV.

HENDRIK'S TEMPTATION.

'THERE is one way out, of course,' said Alers. 'As you probably know, even better than I.'

'And which is that?' asked Hendrik, without looking at his friend.

'Your step-brother.'

Alers was a young Koopstader, a few years older than Lossell. All the Koopstaders being connected by some bond of marriage, whether in this century or the last, there was a kind of relationship between these two young men also, but neither of them had as yet reached a sufficiently eminent position

in the world for the other to remember that they were cousins. The world is full of these one-sided kinships, which never attain to mutual recognition, because they are always either forgotten by both equals or ignored by one superior, and in Koopstad especially there was not much honour to be obtained by the casual mention of 'my cousin the Burgomaster,' because the Burgomaster was everybody else's cousin also, at least from the point of view of the everybody else.

Thomas Alers had enjoyed the advantages of a university education and had recently settled down in his native city as an advocate, practising in the courts of law. He was a sharp young man. By a sharp young man is very often meant a young man whose moral side is blunt, so blunt that the money-making, pushing side comes out cute per contrast. It would be premature to say that Alers was that kind of sharp young man.

As yet he had little to do, but great prospects. The prospects were visible to his mind's far-seeing eye ; the smallness of his present occupations to the most near-sighted busybody in Koopstad.

Busybodies, however—this by the way—are never near-sighted, although they almost invariably squint.

‘Elias Crœsus or the Crœsus Elias,’ the young lawyer continued, playing carelessly with his stick. ‘Of this Crœsus it may also be said that you can call no man happy until he is dead, that is to say, the Crœsus. You understand ? No ? Well, it's hardly worth thinking out. All the same, it's a great nuisance for you, Lossell, that Hubert didn't give that pot a harder push.’

‘Once for all, none of that,’ burst out Hendrik with an indignation which seemed almost disproportionate. ‘It's useless. And it's disgusting. I won't hear it. I've got

enough to do with my own thoughts, worse luck.'

'Tut, tut,' said the other coolly. 'It's no affair of mine. And even you can't be more willing than I to do homage to the new head of the house, Elias the Second—or is it Third? I was thinking of going out to him this afternoon and asking him to let me have some of your law-business. I'd do it cheaper than your father's man.'

'Nonsense,' cried Hendrik, more indignantly still. 'You know perfectly well that Elias isn't head of the firm, and never could be. It's bad enough, as it is, that he should be sleeping partner at all. You needn't make it worse!'

'Sleeping owner, you mean,' retorted Thomas lazily. 'I don't know, I'm sure, who's the firm, if he is not.'

'The firm!' stuttered Hendrik. 'There is none. I mean I shall—I ought to—what are you insinuating, Alers? What do you want?'

Do you advise me to kill Elias as the shortest means of inheriting his wealth ?'

The lawyer started to his feet. His whole manner changed in a moment. 'Don't father your thoughts on me,' he said very angrily. 'I never said, or hinted, or dreamed of, anything as atrocious. And if you choose to sit hatching monstrosities, remember the original bad egg was your own, if you please. How dare you suggest to me, Hendrik, that I am to blame for the abominations of your thoughts ?'

'I fancied it was all in your day's work to suspect everyone of thinking abominations,' answered Hendrik, somewhat alarmed. 'You've often said so. And, besides, you declared just now that my brother supplied me with the only means out of the difficulty. What else did you allude to ?'

'You are too agitated to discuss any subject sensibly,' said Thomas Alers. 'If you will sit down, and listen calmly, well and

good. If not, I would rather take leave of you for the present. There's a client coming to see me to-morrow morning,' he added proudly, 'and I have a number of papers to look over for him still.'

Hendrik threw himself violently into a corner of the sofa, and sat there the picture of sullen impatience.

'The last thing any reasonable being would suggest,' the young advocate went on, 'would be that you or anyone else should in any way injure your unfortunate step-brother. On the contrary, your only way out of the difficulties in which you find yourself is to treat him with all due affection and regard. He is a very important personage now. The most important in all Koopstad, I should almost venture to say. Except, perhaps, my cousin, the Burgomaster.' Alers was poor. His mother had married beneath her. He liked to allude to his mother's relations.

‘He is an idiot,’ said Hendrik, ‘and ought to be under proper guardianship.’

‘He is blind, poor fellow,’ replied Alers. ‘And he is deaf. His memory, I have often heard from you, is weak, and he thinks slowly. Does that constitute idiocy?’

‘You know nothing about him,’ said Hendrik irritably. ‘You have never even seen him, I believe.’

‘I know this,’ retorted Alers imperturbably, ‘that your father was never so incensed as when anyone dared to suggest that his eldest son was not in full possession of his senses, such as they were.’

‘He is an idiot, all the same,’ repeated Hendrik.

‘If that is true, I am very sorry for you, for then there seems to me to be no way out of your difficulty at all.’

Hendrik sat up and stared at him. ‘What do you mean?’ he said.

‘Surely it is very simple, Lossell. You

are not nearly as clear-headed a man of business as I thought you. By the terms of the old gentleman's testament the situation is to remain unaltered until Elias can alter it of his own free will. Now, if his mind is deranged, he has got no free will of his own, and he must accordingly be placed under a "curator."

'I have thought of that,' said Hendrik. 'The will expressly says "guardians or curators." I should in any case be the one trustee, and Hubert would probably be the other.'

'Probably, but it is by no means certain. In fact, from a few words that Borlett, your father's notary, dropped yesterday, I fancy he would stir up the two other members of the family council to propose a different trustee to the juge de paix. Don't forget that you two step-brothers are his heirs, and that Elias has distant cousins enough on the Volderdoes side. The judges don't, as a

rule, look after the interests of such unfortunates over-zealously, but this property is large enough to attract the attention of all Koopstad, and, even if you should be the sole trustees, you will find public opinion watches your doings pretty sharply.'

'I don't want to do anything wrong,' interposed Hendrik.

'Of course not, but you will find it difficult to do anything at all, once you get a "curatela" instituted. We needn't go into law talk just now. But you will soon perceive, I can tell you, that your crazy brother's money would be immovably fixed in the business and on the "Great Book of the National Debt," and there it could go on uselessly accumulating as it has done hitherto.'

'Then it must accumulate. I can't help it.'

'On the other hand, the law recognises no gradations between absolute incapacity and entire responsibility. It can't do so. A

man is either incapable of spending one farthing on lollipops, or fit to look after a business involving a couple of millions. There is no alternative. And if a man isn't mad, he is sane.'

'You want me to say that Elias isn't an idiot,' spake Hendrik. 'Very well; he isn't. He is a man of remarkable intelligence. He is a Sophocles—what d'ye call 'im?—Socrates, I mean.'

'No, he is not, you fool,' hissed his friend in swift sharp accents, angry for the first time, 'and he needn't be, as I tell you. He needn't even be as clever a creature as you are. It's quite sufficient for him to be hovering on the border, as long as he's hovering on the proper side.'

'And why?' asked Hendrik. He was not offended. I think it was one of the worst traits in a character not otherwise evil that insult did not annoy him. 'For him, I grant it you. But not for us. If the busi-

ness be liquidated, as I suppose it must be, and all this money be put into Elias's foolish hands, he will make ducks and drakes of 'it in a month.'

The lawyer turned full upon his friend. 'Is it that you really can't understand me, or is it that you won't?' he asked.

The other shifted uneasily on his seat.

'Hum,' said Alers, and again, for a few moments, he became engrossed in the points of his boots and the tip of his cane.

'You might, at any rate, speak plainly, when you do speak,' remarked Hendrik presently.

'I don't speak. I have no wish to speak unless I'm asked,' was the quick reply.

'Well, I ask you,' said Lossell humbly.

'Then this is all I have to say. I make no doubt you are saying it to yourself. Avoid by all means in your power the appointment of guardians for Elias, even if those guardians be your brother and your-

self. Prove to the outer world that, although afflicted in the loss of his physical senses, he has retained the clear use of his brain and is quite able to look after his own interests.'

'And then?' asked Hendrik, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

'You press me unduly. The interests of brothers surely should have much in common.'

'And when they clash?'

'It seems to me the stronger brain should conquer.'

Another pause. A longer one this time. Then said Hendrik: 'Alers, what makes you say these things? What makes you care to say them?'

'I?' replied the other lightly, as he rose to go. 'Philanthropy! My affection for you, and my love of well-doing! What else?'

'Oh, nothing else,' said Hendrik.

But the lawyer did not quite want to leave

him under that impression—if he really had it.

‘And, of course, it is an advantage to me to have you as a friend. You will be a rich man some day, Lossell, a rich man soon, I fancy, for you are going to be head of the great firm. After all, Elias hasn’t been brought up to business-habits, and in his own advantage, as well as in yours, he will have to make over to you what is yours by right. And when you are a rich man, you will want a professional adviser. I think you want one already. It’s a pleasant thing to be a rich man. The next best thing is to be a rich man’s friend. Ta, ta.’

‘I haven’t got any money to buy it up,’ burst out Lossell.

The other paused in the doorway.

‘What price does Elias ask?’ he said.
‘You don’t know yet? Ah, I thought so. Well, a good deal will depend upon that. Tell me, when you know. Or don’t; just

as you prefer. It's no business of anybody's, as far as I can see. Quite a family arrangement. Good-night.'

Left alone, Hendrik remained for a long time without moving, huddled up in his corner of the sofa, his eyes fixed intently on some spot they did not see. He had understood his friend perfectly.

Vague conceptions which had been floating in his own brain had received definite form and substance. And mistaken impressions had been corrected. He had had a confused idea that Elias might be made harmless by being declared insane, and that then the man who administered his fortune for him, would be allowed to use it, as far as was necessary, for the welfare of the whole family. It had not occurred to him, at least not in that concise form, that it would be far simpler and more efficacious to let his step-brother give his money, instead of taking it

away from him. But at the first hint in that direction, he had seen the whole path clear before him at once. Nothing would be easier, if Elias were left master of himself, than to prove to him that expediency or honesty or any other motive which came handy required him to cede the business to his brothers. He would make a present of it to them ; nay, still better, he would sell it to them for an old glove. A new deed must be drawn up, by which Elias, of his own free will, liberated the acting partners from the yoke which old Volderdoes had fastened on their necks. The shares must be redistributed, Elias selling the larger part of them to his step-brothers at a nominal price, and the profits, also, must be restored to the people who worked for them.

What could be fairer, if you came to think of it ? Elias would be quite rich enough, even if he lost this great income from the business to which he had practically no right.

Vested interests? Capital? Ah, vested interests always look unjust when it's another man that they're vested in. And it appeared to Hendrik that Elias had already drawn far more than he deserved from these vested interests of his. 'Whose the labour is, his should the profits be,' he said to himself. He did not say it to his employés. What would Hubert think? There might be a slight difficulty there, but hardly a very serious one. Nothing could be done till Hendrik had obtained the dispensation he hoped for, and then it was he who would have to do everything. Hubert would be altogether a secondary person. And it would be easy to find a notary who was more obliging than Borlett.

Ouf! It seemed very simple. And really very fair. Were those not the words which constantly returned to his thoughts? Why did they return so constantly, and why did he not simply accept them, and repose in them,

so to say? Why need he repeat thus over and over again: And really very fair? Of course it was fair. Quite fair. Was it not fair?

Must a dead man, then, dead a quarter of a century ago, rule the world by the eternal law of his injustice? And had not this man himself indicated the way of escape? Elias should decide when he came of age. Elias was of age. Let him decide.

He put on his hat, and went out.

Where to, he did not know. He thought the air would do him good. It had been his nightly pleasure, when the day's work was over, to loiter down the gaslit streets of Koopstad, with some equally exquisite friend, the delight of all beholders, on his way to the theatre or the music-hall. To-night he shrank from the far din of the populous streets. It seemed to him as if everybody in

Koopstad knew of his dilemma, and could read his thoughts. He crept away, and slunk down back streets, towards the quays, and, almost before he heeded whither he was going, he found that his accustomed steps had brought him to the warehouse-door.

He rang the door-keeper's bell, again scarcely knowing why. As he was there, he might as well go in for a moment, and see that all was right.

He passed by the old concierge, with a hurried recognition, and walked swiftly down the corridor towards his father's private room. He had never yet been in it by evening. The father would sometimes return to his office after dinner. He had not required this of his son.

Was it this feeling of singularity, or some strange awe of night that made him hesitate on the threshold? What is it that causes the dead to be nearest to us at night-time, calling them up out of the darkness into which they

sank from our sight? Do they really revisit their earthly haunts in those still hours only, when they need not fear the sunlight which to them is an eternal terror and regret? When we come suddenly into the dark room, which was theirs before they left us, we feel their breath fall cold upon our faces, and, as we turn rapidly to look behind us from the newly-lighted candle, we catch a glimpse of the shadow of their shadow flitting away into the widening light.

Young Hendrik Lossell had never felt his dead father so near to him as now when he stood a moment irresolute in the dark passage outside that closed door.

He felt for his matches, and struck a light. And then he threw open the door and stumbled forward into the room.

It was already lighted — dimly — by a movable gas-lamp which stood on the mantel-piece.

Hendrik threw away his match with an

exclamation of surprise. His brother Hubert was sitting motionless in a corner of the room.

‘You here!’ he cried. ‘What in the name of goodness——’

‘Hush,’ said Hubert—almost solemnly.

Hendrik laughed—a nervous laugh. He went round to his brother. ‘I can’t imagine what you are after, Huib,’ he said.

Hubert looked up at him, and Hendrik saw that his face was white. ‘What are *you* after?’ said Hubert.

‘I?’ stammered Hendrik, at a loss. ‘I came to see——’ Again Hubert stopped him.

‘You came because you were called,’ he said. ‘I knew you were coming. I knew it just when you opened the door. Father had told me.’

‘Father!’ cried Hendrik, almost with a scream. ‘Hubert, you are——’ The other started up and flung his hand on his brother’s

mouth. 'Still,' he cried. 'He will hear you. For God's sake, be still.'

'Don't be vexed with me,' Hubert went on hurriedly. 'I came here, I don't quite know why. I couldn't stop indoors, so I ran out, and my footsteps brought me here. I thought I should like to be quite alone in this place once in a way and think of my father's working and—and dying here. And I got Peter to let me in. Of course the place reminds one of father more than any other. And—and, Henk,'—his voice dropped to a whisper; he pointed with one hand—'that's, that's his chair.'

'I know that, surely,' said Hendrik impatiently, but trembling from head to foot as he cast a frightened glance towards the round leather-cushioned armchair before the immense 'bureau ministre' in the middle of the room. On the table the blotter lay, neatly closed; a number of petty, well-known objects, penholders, a large seal, a pair of

scissors, were arranged in tidy rows, waiting for the hand that had used them so often. Its shadow still seemed to hover over them. The gas-lamp now burning on the mantelpiece had been invariably used by the merchant on his desk when he required light.

‘I’ve seen him sitting in it day after day,’ said Hendrik. Something in his brother’s nervous voice and awe-struck manner irritated and agitated him both in one.

‘Ah, but I saw him sitting there to-night,’ whispered Hubert. ‘Don’t stare at me like that, Hendrik. He was sitting very quietly, gazing at the table in front of him, sitting just as he used to sit. And after a few moments, he turned round and looked at me, and his face was dreadfully, unfathomably sad. And then I knew that you would come.’

‘Come away,’ cried Hendrik, pulling at his brother’s arm, and trying to make his voice as loud as he could without raising it

‘Come away immediately. It’s horrible, Hubert, and I won’t stay to hear any more of it.’

‘There is no more,’ said Hubert. ‘Why is it horrible? No, Hendrik, you must stay. For that is why you are come. Hendrik, we must save the old house. Do you hear me? And we must save our father’s memory. There must not be a whisper against it in Koopstad, not a whisper. We must all take our share of the burden, and therefore Elias must take his. Elias must pay the debts, and he must support mother so that no one may know she has less money than formerly. He owes that to his father’s memory, and we must tell him to do it. Is it not so?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Hendrik, gasping for breath. ‘What more?’

‘And *we* owe it to our father’s memory to reverence our step-brother’s misfortune, and to protect him from all injury and all insult.

Not I only who—not I only, you also. He, on his side, will do his duty, as we bid him, and we will do ours. It will be a bond, dear Hendrik, between us and him. And the thought that he has been enabled thus to help us will make his welfare sacred in our sight; will it not?’

‘Yes,’ said Hendrik in a toneless voice.

‘*He* hears us,’ continued Hubert, speaking slightly louder. He drew his brother towards him, and advanced a little nearer to the empty chair. ‘He hears us, I am sure of it, he, who always, through the long years of his untiring labour, held the cruel rights of his hapless son as a thing too holy to be touched. We will do like him. And we will ask nothing of Elias but what we know it is his duty to accord. We declare it, father, even as in thy presence. And if thou understand us, let that sadness die away for ever from thy sight.’

‘Let us swear it, Henk,’ he added softly,

after a moment's solemn pause. 'Swear to save his memory by Elias's help, to maintain the house in its greatness by all powers at our command, and to further the welfare of Elias as if it were our own. Swear.'

Hendrik clasped his brother's hand, and bent his head without speaking.

'We swear,' said Hubert for them both. 'So be it,' he added. 'So help us God Almighty. We have sworn. And now let us go and speak to Elias.'

'It is too late to-night,' began Hendrik feebly.

'No, no ; it is not yet near nine. Let us get it over to-night, and then we can rest in peace. Better have it done to-night. There is yet time.'

And without casting another look backwards into the dim, dreary office-room under its strange air of disturbed daylight, without a thought for the lamp left burning on the

mantelpiece, Hubert fled down the passage, followed by Hendrik.

The old Chinaman, left alone with the shaded light and the memory of the dead, winked hideously from the elevated shrine whence he had presided for so many years over the fortunes of the great house of Volderdoes. Probably he was well content. For even he could not, with that power which is the common privilege only of dead saints and living devils, look far into the awful future, and foretell the bloody sequel of that night's solemn vow.

Old Peter was not sentimental. He came in a few minutes later and turned off the gas, with many grumblings at the recklessness of the young and laudations of his own vigilance. And before he turned the screw, his eye fell on Hendrik's half-smoked cigar, which had been flung into the grate. And he extracted it carefully, and dusted it, and

took it away with him into his lodge. And there he smoked it.

The two brothers found Johanna in the act of helping Elias to bed. In fact, she had just completed his toilet ; and he was saying his prayers. They came in upon this, the maid having admitted them, and stood waiting till he had done. 'The words' fell solemnly on the stillness, issuing from that cavern of darkness. They were few words and simple, such as any child may speak, strangely in contrast with the massive frame and powerful head of this man in the full bloom of a manly adolescence. He thanked God, as usual, for having given him Volderdoes Zonen to provide him with all that he needed. Hubert looked at Hendrik. Hendrik winced and closed his eyes.

And then he prayed for his father, forgetting that he was dead.

When he had done, Hubert went up and

tried to speak to him, but his hand trembled, and Elias shrank back, as if in pain, from the agitated movement of his fingers. 'You interpret for us, Johanna,' said Hubert. 'Tell him we are here. Remind him that papa is dead. Tell him that he is now very rich. That he has got a great deal of money. Does he understand?'

'Yes, I understand,' said Elias, with his bell-like voice. 'Then, if I have got a lot of money, may the old man have his beef-tea?'

'He means an old man who comes here every morning,' said Johanna. 'There was none to-day.'

'Say yes, yes,' burst in Hendrik, as a man speaks when he breaks suddenly through restraint.

'Say yes,' repeated Hubert, 'but tell him we shall want some of his money, not much considering, for the maintenance of Volderdoes Zonen. Does he understand?'

‘I understand,’ said Elias again. ‘If there were no Volderdoes Zonen, I should be very unhappy indeed.’

‘Then he wants it to continue to exist?’

‘Yes, yes,’ interrupted Hendrik.

‘Ask him, Johanna, if he wishes to do all he can that it should continue to do so?’

‘But I can’t do anything,’ said Elias, as soon as this was made plain to him. ‘I can’t do anything.’ He sat up in bed. ‘What can I do?’ he repeated excitedly.

Johanna soothed him. It was told him that he must give money to pay his father’s debts, and a yearly sum to support his step-mother.

It might be questioned how much he understood of all this, but there could not be the slightest doubt of his eagerness to give to whoever wanted or ever asked his support. Had they asked him to divide a million florins between his brothers, he would

unhesitatingly have trusted them and done as they required.

‘No, no, no,’ said Hubert. ‘That is quite enough. Tell him that we will bring him the necessary papers to sign (he must make a cross) when they can be ready. I am sure Borlett will help us, Hendrik, in all this. And now tell him also, Johanna, that we thank him. Tell him that we have sworn to do all in our power to help and to protect him. Never mind if he understands it all. Tell him that we love him; he will understand that. And that we will be good brothers to him, by the help of God.’

‘I understand,’ said Elias after a pause. ‘Kiss me, Hubert. Kiss me, Hendrik. I am very sleepy. I think I should like to go to sleep.’

‘Thank you, gentlemen,’ said Johanna with the tears in her honest eyes.

‘Nothing more ridiculous,’ Alers was re-

peating at the Club, 'than' the thesis that a man must be insane because he is blind, or deaf or even both. It is outrageous. The law knows no guardianship of those who have lost the use of their organs of sense. The brain—ah, that is a different thing. Homer was blind. Galileo was blind—wasn't he? And so was Milton. And I'm sure that a great number of eminent men were deaf and dumb, only one doesn't remember their names. Now there's Elias Lossell, you were speaking of—or was I speaking of him? Well, it doesn't matter—I know the Lossells well. I can assure you Elias is no more idiotic than you or I. I don't say he is as intelligent—but there's a great difference. Now I don't pretend to be nearly as intelligent as you are, but I must object to being called more idiotic. I repeat, such a nature has naturally great disadvantages, but the law fortunately does not add to their number. And it would be outra-

geous not to allow a man to do what he liked with his own, simply because such a man was blind, and deaf and dumb. And Lossell's not even dumb.'

'I certainly agree with you,' said a quiet gentleman by the fireplace. 'But is Lossell really only deaf and blind? I had always understood he was half-witted.'

'Did you ever hear his father say anything of the kind?' asked Alers, turning on the speaker.

'No; I hardly think so. But his brother certainly. Young Hendrik Lossell never speaks otherwise of him than as of a hopeless idiot.'

'Young Hendrik is a capital fellow,' rejoined Alers sententiously, 'He is a great friend of mine. But he is young. And we young fellows are quick with our generalisations. Unless we are lawyers and weigh our words. A man is always an "utter idiot" or "awfully clever." A woman is

always either "the most beautiful creature in the world" or "altogether unfit to look at." And besides, young Lossell is naturally a little jealous of his unfortunate stepbrother, despite the latter's misfortune.'

'I wonder how much money there is,' said another man, a large, loose fellow, who had come lounging up with his hands in his pockets. 'A lot of money anyway, I fancy.'

'There is more money, I can tell you,' replied the young lawyer with a great air of mysterious importance, 'than often passes in this country from a father to his children. They are all rich, naturally, with such a business, but by far the richest of them, nevertheless, is the eldest, the deaf man, Elias. I fancy Elias Lossell must be the richest man in Koopstad.'

There was not one man in that whole smoking-room who did not consider money the supreme thing worth living and working

and lying for. And yet there was not one who dared pronounce the words which rose to all lips mechanically, and say: 'Lucky fellow' of the richest man in Koopstad.

For God's finger held them back.

END OF VOL. I.